The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Robert Gorham Davis is the author of studies of John Dos Passos and C. P. Snow. Early in his teaching career, he was chairman of the Communist Party unit at Harvard; later he was chairman of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom.

Joseph Epstein's new collection of essays, *Plausible Prejudices,* will be published next year by Norton.

Eric Gibson has written for *The New Criterion* on the art of Mark Tansey and Bill Jensen.

Andy Grundberg writes on photography for *The New York Times.*

Dan Hofstadter wrote on the early work of Max Beckmann in the October issue of *The New Criterion.*

Richard Kenney's book of poems, *The Evolution of the Flightless Bird,* won the 1983 Yale Series of Younger Poets award. He is writing under a Guggenheim fellowship this year.

Roger Kimball has written for *The Thomist* and *The Bennington Review.*

Mimi Kramer is the regular theater critic for *The New Criterion.*

Samuel Lipman is music critic for *Commentary* and author of *The House of Music* (1984). His article, in somewhat different form, was delivered as an Anniversary Address to the Fortieth Annual Meeting of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design in Portland, Oregon, on October 20.

Paul Mariani's book of poems, *Crossing Cocytus,* was published by the Grove Press in 1982.

Leslie Norris has published nine books of verse and one book of short stories. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

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Stalinism then and now: an exchange

by Robert Gorham Davis & Hilton Kramer

In the course of a long article in these pages ("Who was Josephine Herbst?" September 1984), written on the occasion of Elinor Langer's recently published biography, I raised certain questions about the role played in the life and work of Josephine Herbst by her steadfast loyalty to Stalinist causes. In my view, it was a loyalty that not only dominated and disfigured the bulk of her writings and the way she conducted her career—both in the period of its public success and in the period of its public failure—but also had a brutalizing effect on her personality and character. Precisely bcause I felt this political commitment to be so central to the life and work of Josie Herbst, I was dismayed to find that, although Elinor Langer had been extremely candid in facing up to almost every other aspect of her subject's life in the biography she spent ten years writing, she had failed (as I saw it) to accord this loyalty to Stalinism the place it deserved. As I pointed out, discussion of Stalinism was virtually limited in the biography to a single footnote—a footnote written to refute the notion that Josie Herbst had been any sort of Stalinist at all.

Inevitably the question has been raised as to whether Stalinism can still be regarded as an important issue in the political and cultural life of the present moment. It is this question—as well as the larger one as to what we mean by "Stalinism"—which is explored in the exchange of letters that follows. Robert Gorham Davis, the distinguished critic and formerly (before his retirement) professor of English at Columbia University, had himself written a long review of Langer's biography in The New York Times *Book Review. It was in response to my article in* The New Criterion, *however, that he has now addressed this important subject.—H. K.*

Letter from Robert Gorham Davis

Dear Hilton:

Reading in *The New Criterion* your thoughtful, richly grounded review of the Elinor Langer biography of Josephine Herbst, I was especially struck, as you intended your readers to be, by the remarks on Stalinism.

Since I broke with the Communist Party in the late fall of 1939, after the Nazi-Soviet pact, forty-five years have passed in which to ponder that painful subject. The amazing fact—as you have pointed out here and in your article on Vivian Gornick's *The Romance of American Communism* and elsewhere—is that after so many decades some of the same exonerating and defensive attitudes so stubbornly persist in those not even alive at the time of the Khrushchev speech of 1956, which revealed at least some of the horrors of Stalin's regime. Young Marxist scholars with whom I am in correspondence still object if I allude to Stalinism with the sense that you gave the term.

Of course when I was in the Party we hated the very sound of "Stalinist," used chiefly by Trotskyites, our most difficult enemies to deal with ideologically at Popular Front meetings, since they, instead of joining us in the assault on the exploiters

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and and war makers, tried to put us on the defensive, and in any case shifted the discussion to grounds that could only alienate the audience. Actually we did not think of ourselves as Stalinists but as Marxists who, despite reservations about Stalin (which of course we never mentioned to our liberal friends), were taking the only possible position in that particular international situation, with Hitler in full power in Germany and moving, almost unopposed by the democracies, to destroy the Spanish Republic.

We were certainly not Stalinists in the sense that we accepted the embarrassing adulation of Stalin with which every speech in the Soviet Union ended and we were certainly not comfortable with the successive treason trials of old Bolsheviks in Moscow. (By "we" I mean the middle-class liberals turned Communist in the CP unit at Harvard and their like in the John Reed Club or the League of American Writers or the national CP fraction of the American Federation of Teachers.) But we quickly learned—learned from the paid organizers, the professionals—that the one thing that was totally unacceptable in the Party was any criticism of Stalin along these lines, even a hint that the situation in the Soviet Union constituted a problem for a true Marxist.

Though we could give a certain amount of latitude to our liberal friends in front organizations, it was imperative that they be quickly answered or silenced if they criticized the Soviet Union. This was not done by defending "Stalinism" (we denied the existence of such a concept) or, unless we were very specifically pressed, defending the trials. Such responses would have identified us as Communist party-liners and would have come hard anyway because of our own true feelings. We were forced to take the position that criticism of the Soviet Union and the CP was harmful to the united struggle against Hitlerism. And this we genuinely believed at that time in that atmosphere. We must not, we kept telling each other, "play into the hands" of Max Eastman or John Chamberlain or whoever the villain of the moment might be.

But why is this such an issue for me still that I am moved to write to you at this length? My concerns are historical certainly but preponderantly contemporary, with some immediacy and even urgency.

I notice that in the new wave of romanticized, nostalgic movies and reminiscences about Reds in the Thirties, some of which you describe as the "literature of exoneration," the Khrushchev speech to the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 is described as the great moment of loss of innocence. His account of Stalin as a successor to Ivan the Terrible had to be accepted because it came from the horse's mouth, and was not a canard circulated by a Max Eastman or a Sidney Hook.

Those of us who had broken with the Party seventeen years earlier had had plenty of time by 1956 to reflect on "Stalinism," watching the development of Communist regimes both under Russian territorial control and elsewhere in the world. These reflections were confirmed and deepened by what went on after 1956.

The term "Stalinism" began to seem questionable again, except for those excesses of Stalin's that bore the stamp of his particular personal paranoia. There were excesses of a somewhat different kind during the Cultural Revolution in China, bearing perhaps the stamp of Mao's widow's passions, and more monstrous excesses under the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. But it was "dictatorship of the proletariat" with total rule from above, not "Stalinism"—unless the two are the same—that made those varying excesses possible.

In a sense we—or the Communists—were right in rejecting the term "Stalinism," since in country after country in very different parts of the world the same kind of absolute rule emerged, and would have emerged, I came increasingly to believe, if Stalin had never existed. It was the product of Marxist-Leninism and this particular period of history and human nature. The cult of personality and many of the techniques that went along with it were borrowed quite shamelessly from Mussolini and Hitler.

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Classical Marxism had no adequate explanation or rationale for either Nazism or for the cult of personality. How explain for instance the decades of dominance by a Kim Il-Sung in North Korea or a Castro in Cuba? Castro came to power in Cuba three years after Stalin's cult of personality had been condemned in Russia, but his own such cult flourished mightily.

Observing then the similar development, by whatever iron law, of a monolithic Communism, unsuccessful both economically and culturally, in such widely different countries, I thought of myself as not only anti-Stalinist but emphatically anti-Marxist-Leninist.

This means nothing in relation to the Communist countries where Marxism-Leninism long ago ceased to be a developing body of generative ideas, but it does mean something in relation to the large number of Marxist intellectuals in the West with whom it seems to me one can still carry on a serious and profitable dialogue, even though—or perhaps especially since—in this country they have no mass base and play a reformist rather than a revolutionary role. Marxism still provides a necessary economic-moral perspective in judging Western developments—the political role of the defense industry, for instance, or of international conglomerates, or of loans by the West to underdeveloped countries. It was not for nothing that so many revolutions were carried out in the name of Marxism. So long as such extreme contrasts exist between the wealth of the West and the poverty of the unaligned nations its impetus will continue.

In a sense we were also right in the Thirties in attributing the word and concept "Stalinism" to the Trotskyites, since this term provides an out—and has continued to do so since—for the various dissident Marxist-Leninists who can blame Stalin rather than Marx and Lenin for the character that Communism has taken on in nearly every country where it has maintained power. Of course to give more than a limited intermediary role to any individual or his ideas, whether Marx or Lenin or Stalin, is vastly to oversimplify the historical process.

In a country as unique as Russia, with its complex history and culture, the three decades of domination by so brutal a personality as Stalin did seem to have particular social and psychological effects that deserve to be studied in themselves, as I think David Shipler has done well in his treatment of the retrospective sense of Stalin among present-day Russians, *Russia: Broken Idols, Solemn Dreams.* But even there it is hard to distinguish what occurred psychologically as a result of living under and after Stalin and what results simply from living, acceptingly, under a Communist regime.

Reading Shipler is very sobering, because it makes one realize how difficult that society would be to move, how little active dissent there is, despite the inadequacies and injustices that the people suffer, how ready they would be to follow their leaders in a nuclear crisis—insofar as they were aware at all of what was going to happen. (Not, of course, that the American people in a rapidly developing nuclear crisis would have any say either.) I suppose that this is true of the people under other Communist regimes also. I say this though I know how unpredictable history is, how quickly the heavily armed Iranian monarchy fell before the unarmed mullahs of Khomeini.

But still, despite my anti-Communism and awareness of the way Communist regimes control their own people psychologically, I am anything but ready to accept the attitude, deeply rooted in anti-Stalinism, of Sidney Hook and Norman Podhoretz and Joseph Brodsky and the flagrantly irresponsible French intellectual André Glucksmann, who are so blithe about nuclear deterrence, so satisfied with simple Red-or-dead formulae, and so preoccupied with the Soviet Union that they have an inadequate world perspective. It seems to me that if we go on with the nuclear arms race as it is now proceeding, with more and more countries getting into the act, a nuclear war that will effectively end civilization is—and in the near future—almost inevitable.

I had an exchange on this subject with Sidney Hook on the letter page of the *Times*

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Literary Supplement. He called me hysterical. That is as it may be. But I am surprised that so long as there is any chance at all of a total holocaust it has not affected the thinking of our intellectuals more deeply. I don't mean leading them to talk about weaponry, effective deterrence, etc.—we have plenty of that—but about the really tragic situation beyond rationality in which we are all caught, and how it must—or rather *should*—revise our whole sense not only of our present situation, with so many belligerent nations scrambling for the obliterating bomb, but of all past history and culture as well. We have an urgently pressing need to discover what has brought us to this pass. Are there perhaps ineradicable traits in human nature that we still indulge, even in our highest culture, which, put together with the bomb, will shortly destroy us?

Anyway, that is what I meant by saying that I responded to talk of Stalinism not only as a matter of past history but of present urgency. These concerns, which haunt me all the time, are what have led to this inordinately long letter.

Yours,
Robert Gorham Davis

Reply from Hilton Kramer

Dear Robert:

Your letter—written in what is obviously a heartfelt response to my article, "Who Was Josephine Herbst?"—contains a great deal of valuable history and raises a number of very important questions. Since the latter are not stated as questions, however, perhaps I may be allowed to reformulate what seem to me the most salient of them as follows: What is the legitimacy of the term "Stalinism" in our discussions of the political, cultural, and moral history of American intellectual life over the last half century or more; and in what relation does our understanding and use of this term stand to the current debate on political and cultural policy in the 1980s? Have we somehow made a fetish of "Stalinism," becoming needlessly obsessed with an episode in our political history that has passed, or does the term and the phenomenon it represents continue to illuminate the world in which we live—a world in which the arms race (among much else) is now indeed so conspicuous and melancholy a feature? If I read your letter correctly, these are the questions that go to the heart of your present concerns.

You are quite right, I think, to suggest that the one issue (Stalinism), and our understanding of it, has a direct bearing on the other (not only our attitude toward the arms race, on which you lay so much emphasis, but our fundamental vision of the political world we inhabit). For in our understanding of what Stalinism was, and is, there will indeed be found the lineaments of our present outlook on the world. This is a point seldom understood by those who have only lately come to these questions, and come to them, it must be said, with an insufficient grasp, owing to their ignorance of the brutal facts, of the role that all this "ancient" history continues to play in shaping the events of the contemporary world. Yet I am obliged to say that I think you are wrong in the conclusions you draw from this important perception—wrong, it seems to me, in a way that bears an uncanny and dispiriting resemblance to the terrible errors you enumerate in regard to the past. As between what happened *then* and what we are facing *now,* it seems to me you have overlooked a vitally important connection.

Then, as you say, it was the "united struggle against Hitlerism"—which Stalin, of course, betrayed as soon as it suited his interests to do so—that caused you, and so many like you, to remain silent about the Soviet Union and, whatever the private doubts may have been, to withhold all public expression of criticism of the crimes that Stalin was committing in the name of achieving Communism. *Now* it is "the nuclear arms race" and the "chance . . . of a total holocaust" that causes you to adopt an exactly parallel posture of complaisant silence about the Soviet Union and its role—

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which you surely know to be primary and unremitting—in creating both the arms race and our need to prevent the Communist powers from winning it and thereby acquiring the ability to destroy the last precious remnants of democracy that survive in the world today.

Then all of you were terrified at the thought of aligning yourselves with the views of "Max Eastman or John Chamberlain or whoever the villain of the moment might be," even though their indictment of Stalin's murderous policies and objectives was one that you knew or suspected to be true. *Now* you are similarly afraid to be aligned with the views of "Sidney Hook and Norman Podhoretz and Joseph Brodsky," et al.,—and again, not because you believe they are actually incorrect in their assessment of the Soviet Union (I believe you know *that* to be true as well), but because the implications of that assessment are deemed to be too difficult or too terrible to even think about. The principal implication to be drawn from their assessment, of course, is that we must arm ourselves against our enemies to whatever extent our enemies make necessary if we are to survive as a democratic society. But this difficult and fundamental truth about the world in which we find ourselves is something you cannot bring yourself to face—it seems, quite literally, to unnerve you. And in this unnerved state you seek what solace you can in the thought that those who *have* brought themselves to face the unpleasant realities of Soviet power in the contemporary world suffer from, of all things, "an inadequate world perspective."

What, then, has really changed in this "world perspective" since the days when, as a loyal member of the Communist Party, you—again like so many—supported the Soviet Union even in the face of private doubts? In some respects, it would seem that very little has changed—especially where the Soviet Union is concerned. No matter what is happening in the world—whether Hitler is annexing Czechoslovakia and supporting fascism in Spain or the Soviet Union is annexing Afghanistan and supporting a totalitarian revolution in Central America—the Soviet Union itself must be exempted from all criticism and accountability. It must not be thought to be a threat to our existence: the thought itself is just too dangerous to entertain. This, finally, is what you mean when you speak of those who are "so preoccupied with the Soviet Union": that to dwell on the reality of the Soviet threat is to be deprived of the comforting "world perspective" in which you (and so many others) have nowadays taken refuge. The truth is, alas, that this is a "world perspective" that refuses—despite whatever private doubts persist about Soviet motives and Soviet actions—to take the side of democracy in its effort to resist the spread of totalitarianism and terror. From the lofty heights of this perspective, you appear to regard yourself as somehow "above" such petty concerns.

If it would not be quite correct to characterize this "world perspective" as an entirely Stalinist one, it is nonetheless essential to any understanding of it that we recognize the role that the Stalinist mentality has played in its creation. This is something that you tacitly acknowledge yourself when, in rejecting the views of "Sidney Hook and Norman Podhoretz and Joseph Brodsky," et al., you speak of their views as being "deeply rooted in anti-Stalinism." About this you are surely right, Robert—though it behooves you to recognize that in the case of Joseph Brodsky, it is a view also deeply rooted in the persecution and suffering he endured as a citizen in the Soviet Union. But this acknowledgment, such as it is, comes late in your letter, and only after you have attempted—not very successfully, in my opinion—to discredit the legitimacy of "Stalinism" as a term in the discussion by claiming that since Stalin's were by no means the only crimes committed against entire populations in the name of Marxist-Leninist ideology we are wrong to attach his name to a political evil of much wider scope. This I find a bizarre argument, if not indeed

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a disingenuous one. For while it is unhappily true that the political evil we speak of is not limited as a historical phenomenon to the specific dates of Stalin's tyrannical regime and that from the days of Lenin himself, to those of Mao, Pol Pot, and Fidel Castro, this evil has manifested itself on a massive scale in other times and other places, it is to Stalin that there nonetheless belongs the ghastly distinction of having carried it to an unprecedented extreme and thus serving as a model for the Communist tyrannies that have followed in his wake. Marxism-Leninism is not, after all, an abstraction—despite your vestigial inclination to regard it as an "economic-moral perspective"—but a political reality in the name of which millions have been put to death and many millions more have been systematically deprived of their most fundamental human rights. It is a political reality that has a history, and in that history Stalin's place is pre-eminent. It is sheer obfuscation—if not something worse—to pretend otherwise. At the very least, it is a plea for historical amnesia.

When we speak of Stalinism, however, we refer not only to the political evil that Stalin was pre-eminent in perfecting but to a set of attitudes in regard to it—attitudes replete with a system of alibis and exonerations designed to place this evil and all allegiance to it beyond the reach of moral judgment. And just as the evil that Stalin perfected has lived on and prospered since his lifetime, spreading to more and more parts of our beleaguered world, so too has this set of attitudes lived on and prospered, benefitting one after another of the bloody tyrannies that have taken Stalin's regime of murder and terror as their model. It is for this reason, above all, that "Stalinism" retains its undiminished legitimacy as an indispensable concept and locution in the lexicon of critical thought. It would be lovely indeed if this terrible phenomenon had disappeared from the face of the earth. But it hasn't. It has spread and acquired the military and political power to destroy us. Since the phenomenon persists, there must be a term to describe it—and all efforts to discredit the term must be recognized for what they mostly are: an attempt to deny the existence of the evil itself. In that effort of denial, the very essence of the Stalinist mind shows its true nature.

Dear Robert, you know far too much about the evil of Communism and the bad faith of its apologists to join in this denial. You know very well that the literature of romance and exoneration that is now at a flood tide, swamping the universities, the media, and our cultural life generally, is a literature of fictions where it is not a literature of outright fraud, and it is much to your credit that you have refused to contribute to or ally yourself with it. Yet in attempting to discredit the concept of Stalinism in the interests of a "present urgency," you have only substituted for this mendacious literature of exoneration an attitude of abdication. You have, in effect, declared yourself "neutral" in the struggle that our democracy now wages to defend itself against its totalitarian enemies and their intellectual allies. This, I am afraid, is what your precious "world perspective"—freed at last from having to encompass such inconvenient phenomena as Stalinism—really comes to. It is a perspective which, if adopted as the basis of policy, would leave us—in every sense—defenseless against one of the greatest evils the modern world has known.

Sincerely,
Hilton Kramer

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Cultural policy: whither America, whither government?

by Samuel Lipman

We all know that the life of art is perhaps more than ever before determined not just by the encounter between the artist and the art public but also by the interplay between the art work and the social, economic, and political matrix in which art is inspired, funded, produced, and experienced. As modern life becomes more complex and at the same time more centralized, the process by which art exists increasingly becomes the object of rational analysis and calculation. This manifestation of what the French call *planification*—the institutionalizing of the making of goals and projections—goes by the name of cultural policy, a phrase whose inevitable associations with the Third Reich of Hitler and Goebbels seem to have done little to render moot.

Though it is perhaps unfair to prejudice a discussion of cultural policy by reference to the monstrous regime of Nazism, even in this unfairness there is a grain of truth: cultural policy is, and has been, a settled part of European life, and not just under totalitarianism. Among Europe's many cultural policies, it is those directed toward high culture that have played the leading part. Admittedly, the phrase "high culture" is often problematical. About the only sure thing one can say about high culture is that everything belongs to its domain and at the same time nothing does. My own, no doubt incomplete, definition is this: high culture is concerned with, though not strictly limited to, art, literature, and learning that is either created to endure or that at some point after its creation is widely recognized to have become a permanent part of the civilization that is transmitted by the settled institutions of society.

In Europe—in what so touchingly used to be referred to as the old country—this high culture was the province of established elites who drew their legitimacy not from the marketplace but from their participation in the state or, in premodern times, in the institutions that eventually gave birth to the state. To say this is hardly to deny the role of the people in building the great Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals or in creating the folk music upon which Western art music has so gloriously built. The point is not that the great notables of traditional societies created art, but that they organized its production, paid for it, and provided for its preservation in their homes, their courts, and their established churches.

When these ruling elements of society, casualties of industrialism and egalitarianism, were replaced after many hundreds of years by the more or less modern governments that today rule from the Atlantic Ocean all the way east to the Pacific Ocean, matters were different. Responsibility for the direction of high culture was now assumed by all-powerful central state apparatuses. Interestingly, this generalization is as true for the democratic and still largely capitalist countries of Western Europe as it is for the monolithic Communist states of the

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East. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the difference between the French government's attitude to culture and that of truly socialist governments is a difference—one to be cherished, I hasten to add—of quantity and efficiency of control rather than quality and ambition.

Before we jump to defend European practice on the basis of its high-mindedness or to attack it for its capitulation to arrant statism, we might pause for a moment to see what real issues are involved. I would suggest that Europe is reacting in a rational way to two peculiar developments that mark and even distort modern political life: the modern state's loss of legitimacy in the hearts and minds of its citizens, and the ascendancy of high culture over religion as the means of carrying and articulating the spirit of the nation. Sad to say, this loss of legitimacy, though of course vastly more pervasive on the other side of the Iron Curtain, has even begun to eat into the political life of such former bastions of public spiritedness as Great Britain. The role of high culture in filling this awful vacuum can be seen all the way from the all-Beethoven concerts at London's Royal Festival Hall to the Bolshoi Ballet's position in the Soviet Union as a national shrine. Neither politicians nor more altruistic representatives of national communities have been slow to notice the political disease or the cultural cure. It can all be put rather simply: as the people lose faith in God and in the state, appropriations for culture and the rhetoric of its advocacy go up like the hottest of hot-air balloons. Although dictators of left and right have been the quickest to take advantage of this high cultural road to political survival, it must be noted that even democratic groups across the water increasingly see their future in art.

How much of this poignant story is relevant to our blessed America? The answer is: more than you might think, and less than you might fear. But before we can attempt to understand the present state of affairs here at home, we should first consider briefly the history of cultural policy in this country.

As Americans we live in a uniquely free country. We all have known about our political and economic liberty; we have relied on, and exploited to the hilt, the autonomy and diversity America has enjoyed since its founding two hundred and more years ago. We have exalted pluralism wherever we have found it and even tried to encourage diverse and sometimes bizarre behavior where we have fancied too little existed. The slogan "Don't tread on me" could well stand as the rubric in whose name the good—that is, the free—life in America has been lived.

From our free society to our free culture is but a small step; culture, after all, is what the sociologists tell us society does. Mirroring our social melting pot, American culture over the years has been a kaleidoscopic whirl of dippy trends, stairways to nowhere, herd-like self-indulgence, and calls to repentance. To put it another way: we have reaped the advantages, as well as the penalties, of living in a world of private freedom and public limits. The lesson of America, let me repeat, has been the lesson of liberty.

Has this liberty, so fretted about by observers of the American scene since Mrs. Trollope, been deleterious to the pursuit of high culture? If we look, for example, at a whole line of popular entrepreneurs from P. T. Barnum to Hugh Hefner, the answer might seem to be yes. But when we look at the great American private universities founded in the last century and even before, with their art departments and their dedication to the humanities; when we look at the great private art collections, such as those of Gardner, Frick, Morgan, and Mellon, that have been given over to public use; when we look at New York's Metropolitan Museum, founded in the last century, and the Museum of Modern Art, founded more than fifty years ago; when we look at our greatest musical institutions, from the Metropolitan Opera in New York to the San Francisco Opera, from the New York Philharmonic (founded in 1842 by its own musicians) to the Boston Symphony (founded in 1881 by the banker Henry Lee Higginson and per-

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sonally maintained by him until the end of World War I)—when we look at these magnificent achievements of high culture, extending from the purses of the rich to the inquiring minds of the poor, we see that America has lacked neither high culture nor a rational way of preserving that culture. Comparing these achievements to those of Europe suggests no difference in quality or scope; what is remarkable is that these triumphs, though undeniably for the benefit of the public at large, were private in conception, planning, funding, and direction.

It is true that these achievements constitute examples not of the creation of high culture but rather of its preservation and presentation through institutions. But when we look at the American record in the *creation* of art over the last century we can surely be proud of the record of this young (in comparison to the nations of Europe) country. In nineteenth-century painting, for instance, we can claim such notable artists as Homer, Eakins, Whistler, and Sargent; from a somewhat later time we can mention Marin, Hartley, Dove, Macdonald-Wright, and O'Keefe, all of them born between 1870 and 1890. In twentieth-century painting, we know that the School of Paris was succeeded after World War II by the New York School. In early modern architecture Americans, led by Louis Sullivan and later Frank Lloyd Wright, assumed world influence; in photography the names of Stieglitz, Steichen, Weston, and later Ansel Adams come immediately to mind. In nineteenth-century literature Hawthorne, Whitman, Melville, Poe, and Henry James were world figures; in the present century, I need hardly list the mighty procession of American authors who have changed the way the modern world sees itself. In dance, Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, Agnes DeMille, and George Balanchine, together with his creation the New York City Ballet, have led the way. In music there is Copland and Sessions and Carter and even (though hardly to my own taste) Cage; in music performance the important American singers and instrumentalists are too numerous to mention.

It would be unfair to leave this account of the place of America in the creation of high culture without mentioning our colossal achievements in that most democratic of areas, the audience. Millions of people have gone to museums, concert halls, opera houses, bookstores, libraries, and private schools, institutions supported almost entirely by private funds with the wise encouragement of blanket tax exemptions and deductions. Nor, in this context, should we ignore the achievements of the commercial radio networks (and in their early years, the television networks also) in expanding and satisfying an enormous audience for the good things of the mind.

It should be stressed that these triumphs took place *without* our possessing an articulate, planned, and enforced cultural policy. The same glorious anarchy that made Mencken, to mention only one of our brilliant homegrown critics, feel that he was living in a zoo also produced the achievements of high culture. There are those who say that this expansion of high culture was enforced upon a witless rabble by a pack of exploiting capitalists determined to use art and learning as the opiate of the masses and a goad for them to become good bourgeoisie. But these salesmen of Marxist cant love neither art nor the masses whose "primitive" culture they profess to adore. Of course America's enlightened patrons and savants had a "cultural policy"; of course immigrant and native parents alike had in mind a "cultural policy" when they sent their children to school, to concerts, operas, and art exhibitions. But their "policy" was decided individually and in small groups, and its goal was to enlighten, not to exploit.

There is one other myth that needs to be dispelled, this one regularly retailed by the present guardians of the arts establishment: the myth that the arts in America somehow began just a little less than twenty years ago, with the inception of *federal* funding and *federal* cultural policy. According to this mistaken reading, 1965 is the *annus mirabilis* of American art because it marks the first year of the National Endowment for the Arts,

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the central organization for federal arts funding (and of whose advisory board I have now been a member for the past two years).

The idea that before the existence of federal funding there was no healthy growth of high culture in the United States is easily rejected. The evidence is simply overwhelming that high culture has been a major and well-supported activity in America for more than the last century. But at the same time it can hardly be denied that the very existence of federal involvement in the arts has meant that for the first time in our history we do indeed have a cultural policy, backed by money collected from the American people in taxes and spent according to the legislative intent of the Congress and the administrative direction of the executive branch.

Because we have had a cultural policy in the recent past, we must ask ourselves about its effect. But before we can talk about results, we must ask just what this cultural policy has been. It is not an easy task to describe this policy in any exact way, of course; however intrusive our federal government can on occasion be, we hardly have the kind of *dirigiste* tradition in this country that makes the imposition of the will of the state so prominent in France. In America governmental cultural policy, like the federal apparatus in general, is not fully integrated and coherent, or even rigorously enforced when it is capable of such enforcement. It must be remarked, too, that this cultural policy has not been absolutely consistent from year to year or from administration to administration.

These caveats notwithstanding, it is possible to describe the overall character—and effect—of official cultural policy as it has been reflected in the rhetoric and actions of the National Endowment for the Arts. When I attempted such a description for the Heritage Foundation just prior to the 1980 presidential election, I found a tendency on the part of office-holders and their clients to receive criticism first with scorn and then with rage. I trust that whatever else the past four years of uneasy relations between the Reagan Administration and arts advocates may have proven, it now can be accepted that the arts will survive in America even when the actions of its advocates are held up to the same kind of public scrutiny we accord to art itself.

What, then, has our cultural policy been? At its heart, it has been the support of institutions, not individuals. These institutions have been of two kinds: the great presenters (museums and symphony orchestras, opera, dance, and theater companies) and the organized advocates—in music, for example, the American Symphony Orchestra League, Chamber Music America, Opera America, and the National Institute for Music Theater. These latter organizations, often funded by the very government whose funds they then solicit, exist to represent their membership, largely re-creative institutions rather than creative artists. It is true that there has been support available, through the medium of individual fellowship grants, to individual creative artists. This support, however, has over the history of the NEA amounted to only a small fraction of total federal arts funding.

At no time has the federal government—or for that matter any other level of government—attempted to take a predominant role in *financing* the arts in America. On the contrary, along with the constant exhortations for increased official support, backers of government's role in the arts have made clear that at no time should public subsidy assume the major responsibility for footing the arts bill. But at the same time it must be stressed that official cultural policy has from the beginning concerned itself with maximizing official *influence* on how private arts dollars are to be spent.

This policy goal has been accomplished by means of what is called at the Endowment *leadership* and *presence*. In this context, leadership means the NEA imprimatur, the "governmental Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval." (I might add that I heard this exact phrase used by a responsible and respected executive at a congressional dog-and-pony show whose purpose was to round up public opposition to proposed cuts in the

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NEA budget.) The need for this official endorsement, of course, suggests a lack of confidence by the arts-advocacy establishment in the intelligence, artistic sophistication, and will of private and (most especially) corporate patrons.

If NEA *leadership* desires to direct private funds toward those projects the NEA considers qualified, NEA *presence* represents an effort to proclaim the involvement of the federal government in every meritorious arts activity. The intended effect has been the reflection of glory *from* the art back *to* the NEA, rather than vice versa. The message going out to the American people no less than to artists has been quite clear: government legitimizes art, and art legitimizes government.

If this notion of reciprocal blessing has been the general policy, the *specific* policy has been to use federal funds in a matching-grant program in order to "leverage" private contributions toward arts organizations. In this way, one federal dollar, whether awarded as a regular or a challenge grant, entails the contribution of several private dollars. Thus public funds are only made available when much larger private funds are allocated to purposes deemed worthy of support by the federal government.

It would be a mistake to think that this governmental role has been achieved only through the spending of public monies. Politicians, ranging from the president and vice-president and their families to senators and congressmen, have gained extensive publicity from their enthusiastic demonstrations of love for the arts. During the Carter Administration matters went so far that to the presidential testimony for beauty was added the labor of the vice-president's wife, otherwise known as "Joan of Art."

A hallmark of all this support of culture has been a pronounced tendency to turn art into entertainment, to advocate those kinds of art that are already attractive to a large and expanding audience or can be packaged so as to appeal to such an audience. Thus the most proudly claimed fruits of official support of the arts have been blockbuster museum exhibitions sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and public television programs, of which "Great Performances" and the "Live from . . ." offerings are the most prominent. Loudly trumpeted, too, has been NEA support of the year-round activities of symphony orchestras and opera companies, support that has been justified on grounds of audience numbers, as if the only justification for high culture in a democracy is the size of the body count made after the event. Time and time again the emphasis has been not on what art *teaches* to its audience but on the *pleasures* and *satisfactions* that may be obtained from what is now so nicely called "the arts experience."

Flowing naturally from this idea of art as a consumer—and consumable—good, has been the idea that art is for everyone in every situation. This conception received perhaps its most lapidary formulation in John D. Rockefeller 3rd's injunction for arts education: "We need to expose *all* of the children in our schools to *all* of the arts." A similar approach, though one couched in less Olympian terms, may be found in the words delivered by football star Joe Namath in two 1983 spots prepared for television distribution by the Oklahoma Arts Council:

> When I played football for the New York Jets, the good guys didn't always win. But now that I'm an actor, I've learned that with the arts, everybody wins.
>
> Whether it's a child's first drawing or a wonderful symphony, art makes our lives richer and more enjoyable.

Added to this conception of art for everyone has been the idea that everything is art and that art can improve everything. From the idea that everything is art has developed an unwillingness to make necessary distinctions between arts and crafts, and between high and popular culture; from the idea that art can improve everything has developed a willingness to see art as improving the amenities of everyday life and reclaiming whole neighborhoods from the blight of urban decay.

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It cannot be denied that much thought and effort have been given to two areas that would seem to be irreconcilable with the goal of presenting high culture as entertainment: the participation of minorities and other disadvantaged groups in the cultural expansion, and the presentation of an avant-garde—or at least new—art to an audience that wants none of it. Both areas are similar in that their spokesmen represent active and troublesome constituencies: the minorities and related groups because they speak for large blocs of voters, and the avant-gardists because they occupy a position of strength in the media disproportionate to their representation in the world of the arts. Fittingly, both problems have been similarly "solved": while the main business of marketing arts circuses has been allowed to continue unopposed, protesting groups have been bought off by being accorded special programs in which they only compete with themselves and by being allowed prominent figurehead representation elsewhere.

Another important component of our present cultural policy is budgetary. Two easy-to-grasp adages are at all times urged upon those who would consider themselves cultured: more money for the arts is better, and no amount of money is enough. The implications of this kind of thinking are simple; the standard of quality is the size of the budget, and the measure of rate of artistic progress is the rate of budgetary increase.

Finally, mention must be made of the fact that our cultural policy relies, for both the formulation and implementation of its goals, on a formidable bureaucratic class of administrators and advocates. Indeed, it is this class, and most assuredly not the artists or the present amorphous and unsophisticated audience, that is charged with making decisions about what the contemporary image of art shall be and what part of even that confected product will be brought to the attention of the public. It is this governing class too that is seen to be responsible for fund-raising, now euphemistically called "development." Furthermore, the possibility of raising money for an arts organization is seen as the surest sign of that organization's *artistic* viability. I should add that crucial to gaining large contributions from generous patrons now is the perception by these donors of the organization's financial stability. Thus the arts "development" circle is made complete: money can be raised because the institution is financially solid, and the institution is financially solid because money can be raised.

The cultural policy that I have polemically described above is not just a matter of *government* fiat. There is now no conspiracy on the banks of the Potomac to direct American culture. What does exist is a happy cooperation between the private sector, which personally used to contribute money and now is content to contribute its time, and government officials, who wish both private-sector endorsement and future career possibilities. In this regard, another salient difference between European (at least Western European) cultural policies and ours must be noted: in Europe the Edward Heaths and the François Mitterands are themselves cultural leaders and representatives of the educated and prosperous classes; in the United States, political leaders fear any identification with elite cultural attitudes and tastes.

With this summary of current cultural policy in mind, we may perhaps be ready to describe where in our cultural life this policy has brought us. Unfortunately, just because such exaggerated claims have been made by its backers for the transforming role of the National Endowment for the Arts, any negative appraisal will be taken as a criticism of the NEA itself. While I cannot deny that I am criticizing the Agency, I do not see the Agency in particular or government in general as the sole architect of our problems. The responsibility, as is only proper in a democratic society, is both public ***and*** private, and deserves to be treated as such.

As we look around us at the life of high culture in America at present, I am afraid that there is little in blossoming health. The last great era of American painting was in the 1950s; in architecture we are confronted

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with congeries of styles whose greatest recommendation is that they are truly artless. In literature, the general run of fiction seems dismal, with few acknowledged masters to offer leadership; in poetry, despite the vaunted explosion of activity for which present policies are held responsible, the little being written that is first-rate hardly seems new, and of that which is new very little seems first-rate. In music composition, though we are told that creativity is taking wing on every side, what one hears of the postmodern "revolution" sounds either like the 1960s avant-garde writ tame or like the amateur musings of half-trained sound fanciers. In opera, there are no works being written today that can engage the attention of the greatest American opera houses or of dedicated opera audiences. We are being told, it is true, that great art is now being created on the "cutting edge" of multimedia and performance art; thus far, the only real achievement of these genres has been to *épater le bourgeois*.

What about the performing arts, the repository of such a large percentage of cultural funds from government and the corporate sector? Here the result is a triumph not of art but of merchandising. Of all the disciplines, dance—largely because it is the immediate inheritor of the great work of Graham and Balanchine—seems in the best shape. But even here the last few years have seen a disturbing contraction in the flourishing of modern dance so proudly associated with official cultural policy; the result has been a tilt in both funding and audience attendance toward traditional ballet and away from the new. In theater, we are witnessing the collapse of the historically great Broadway theater as an artistic force; the non-profit theater sector, despite flashes of creativity, is mired in the production of crowd pleasers, golden oldies, and trivial novelties. In music performance, American orchestras no longer occupy the pre-eminent world role they once did; American orchestras, moreover, will go to any conceivable length, and then some, to avoid a music director whose career bears a native stamp.

Having been so critical of the way things are going, and so pessimistic about the creative value of what is now so praised, I must hasten to state my fundamental faith in the essential vitality and interest of American art, and in the existence of a sophisticated and mature American audience willing and able to support new art. Without doubt, there is art in America beyond what we now so easily call "the arts," just as there are art lovers in great numbers who act as individuals rather than as objects of mass marketing. Yes, there is art being created in America; yes, there is art being loved in America. But it is being made by artists, and loved by—and that means supported by—art lovers. It is neither being created nor facilitated by the kind of bureaucratic advocacy we now see all around us.

And so we have come to what is perhaps the most difficult problem: the future of official cultural policy, of its proper nature and desirable direction. One question must be gotten out of the way immediately. Can we go back to our former ways, to private support and a guidance of high culture assisted only by indirect and unorganized mechanisms of government support? There was certainly value in the way we used to do things, in the days when artists went only to patrons, not to government, when to be rejected by one patron meant only that one had to find someone else. Today, in the case of a government turndown, the very future of the cultural enterprise itself is called into question.

Can we, then, turn back the clock? Of course the answer is no. The present state of mutual public-private co-optation came into being because of fundamental changes in the 1950s and 1960s in American society. The combination of widening economic affluence and degenerative changes in the quality of American education ensured both a clamor for popular culture and the erosion of the base for private patronage. Furthermore, in these matters mere existence in the present is the best guarantee of continued existence in the future. Because our present

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system of arts advocacy and support is now at least twenty years old, it has acquired a formidable bureaucratic and economic inertia, in which arts institutions directly and artists indirectly are everywhere dependent on the *status quo.* I count myself, after all, a conservative, and the purpose of conservatism is not revolution but conservation, not of the perfect but of the best.

There is still another important point to be made here. Even—perhaps especially—for conservatives, the state is a necessary organ of society, a vital component of the process whereby individuals can live in society, and whereby society transmits its highest values from history to posterity. Precisely because it is clear from even a cursory study of Western cultural, social, and political life that art can legitimize the state under whose wing it takes shelter, the American state, no less than its European counterparts, will find itself forced in its own interest to have a cultural policy. To say this is not to say that this cultural policy should, as it does today in Europe, rule, predominate, or even direct, or that the present hand-in-glove relation between the private and public sectors, in which private arts advocates use government to manipulate private activities, is either necessary or proper.

If government, then, will inevitably have a cultural policy, what kind of cultural policy should it have? Because the state is unavoidably so important in our lives, because the state has duties to society which go so far beyond the satisfaction of immediate desires, it is clear that the state should never support entertainment. Woe to the citizenry when the state, in addition to providing bread as it now does, provides circuses. Instead, the state should support art, construed not as amusement but as one of the chief carriers of civilization. Here in America this mission can be seen as having a particular relevance to our national mission of making one people out of many, of building social unity out of a pluralistic culture. Whatever the future of our society, we can hardly doubt that Western civilization can and must serve as a binding force, using the best that has been felt and thought and accepting, it goes without saying, the contributions of other great civilizations and cultures. The goal must be what it has so proudly been throughout American history: cultural uplift for all.

And so I think we come to some idea of a proper role for the National Endowment for the Arts. It should be *educational,* an attempt to teach rather than to beguile. I am aware that art diverts and amuses; I am aware that people can have a good time making and experiencing art. But these laudable *personal* goals seem to me, as I have stated above, false goals for government. Instead, the NEA should concern itself with communicating to our citizens the particular kind of knowledge about ourselves, our world, and most especially the civilized heritage that art enshrines.

In the area of scholarship and learning, I am happy to say that under the chairmanship of William J. Bennett the National Endowment for the Humanities has made great progress toward finding a noble role for government in communicating our civilized heritage. At the NEA, despite recent attempts to restore administrative integrity and a sense of quality, interest group pressures and bureaucratic foot-dragging have all too frequently meant business as usual; in particular, it has proven amazingly difficult to improve NEA arts education programs, those happy hunting grounds for "arts experiences," studies, conferences, and position papers without number or end. Beyond the confines of specifically instructional programs themselves, any serious attempt to educate for civilization through art to the highest levels of culture has all too often been viewed at the NEA as improperly elitist and unresponsive to presumed—and usually encouraged—constituency demands.

What can be said about how the NEA might go about its proper role of education? Though we have no model in our official arts policy for such an effort, and though policy is not forwarded by talking but by action, I do think several suggestions can be advanced. To begin with, the tyranny of the number of bodies served and of the celebri-

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ties that serve them must be ended, so that artistic *content* and not audience *reaction* will be the chief criterion for support. I would also suggest that thought be given to ending the separation between the support of what is popular and old and what is unpopular and new. This can only be done by stressing not the revolutionary nature of new art but its development out of, and continuity with, the past. Furthermore, a sincere try must be made at bringing into the work of the NEA two hitherto underused resources: creative artists and teachers. In particular, the NEA must make peace with the educational establishment, which it has historically outflanked, devalued, and even ignored. Art is too important to be left to administrators.

Will the Congress, and back of the Congress the American people, support what will immediately be characterized as a program both quixotic and arrogantly elitist? It is difficult for me not to believe that once the citizens of America understand that it is the purpose of government to inspire individual and local aspirations to and activity in high culture, a truly educational NEA would not be welcomed and backed. Allow me to give just one example of what I mean: surely art and official cultural policy alike are better served by encouraging a local pianist in a small, isolated, town to give an all-Beethoven recital than by bringing in, for one night only, an over-touted touring celebrity to do the same thing. If we can make this clear, I have faith that the people and their elected representatives will understand.

We have heard much in recent years about public-private "partnership." I confess that, understandable as this desire to lessen conflict between these spheres and lessen governmental budgetary outlays is, such talk seems confusing and even misleading. In cultural life and in public life both our pressing need is not for a muddying of the distinctions between that which belongs to individuals and that which belongs to government. The need is rather for an exact understanding of proper government functions and the invigoration of private action in everything else. In the arts, this suggests the importance of efforts to strengthen the private sector of American life in its ability to make educated, sophisticated decisions about cultural matters, decisions which are based not upon the public relations imperatives of advocacy or the mindless praise for all art, any art, and every art. What is needed is a private sector that will do more than pay for art, a private sector that will treat art, because it is a carrier of civilization, as a cornerstone of its own liberty. Here too is an educational task, and this one not the least important. It is time to begin teaching.

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Learning from Leavis

by Mark Stevens

Talk of "influence" makes a novelist itch, especially when the subject is his own work. He does not want his books soiled by other minds; he likes them to feel clean. When pressed, however, he might admit that, yes of course, certain people and places influenced him. His parents and his hometown. This or that novelist, now dead. He might offer, voluntarily, to describe his revolt against a particular writer or milieu. In a young artist rebellion is respectable; and acknowledging the debt of dislike is not hard. What he will seldom admit, however, is that a critic has influenced him. Does the tail wag the dog?

I once shared this prejudice. When I finished my first novel last year, I could confess my chief enthusiasms: the bighearted artistry in Tolstoy, the way of character in James, the questing spirit in American fiction. I could defend my dislike of most late modernist work and admit that, while I admired the genius of Joyce, he and his offspring meant little to me. But critics? I knew from experience—as a practicing art critic—that the views of a critic, whether favorable or not, intelligent or not, rarely help an artist. It is a strange and marvelous truth that an artist cannot easily divide himself into his strengths and weaknesses. The two are often inseparable; and, like an oyster needing its bit of grit, an artist may create his strongest and most beautiful work by accepting, shaping, and finally transforming his weakness. A critic can point to the weakness, but not teach the trick.

And yet, one critic did influence me. The F. R. Leavis of *The Great Tradition* helped convince me, as I began to write for myself ten years ago, that art could be more than a serious game. He made novels, in particular, seem worth the making. How he did so is difficult to explain. I was not one of his conservative followers, I recoiled from his censorious tone, I disagreed with some of his judgments, I did not believe in social renewal through the study of literature. He taught me nothing about technique; he did not color my imagination. But he was often there, in the corner of my mind. In what ways, then, did this critic become a deep and steady encouragement to a young writer?

I first read *The Great Tradition* in 1974, at a time when I disliked almost everything around art. Its apparatus—the bureaucracy, the hustle, the money, the gossip, the fashion—discouraged me. Art often seemed to belong to intellectuals who cared principally for their careers or to stylish people who used it as a way to admire their own taste. (At Cambridge, where I was studying history, I sometimes thought art was a glass of sherry.) Art meant seminars and jargon-filled criticism; art was an excuse for politics in the case of Marxists and a reason for semiological musings in the case of structuralists. Did three factories called "history," "society," and "psychology" produce novels for the benefit of professors? I sometimes thought so.

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My wife, a student of Leavis's wife, Queenie, urged me to read *The Great Tradition*. As an incorrigibly dissolute and goat-like reader, who would happily consume a few pages of anything, including the telephone book, I began reading it—surprised that I was reading it all the way through. What first impressed me was everything the book was not. Where were Thackeray and Joyce, Trollope and Woolf? To his great tradition Leavis only admitted, with reservations about each, Austen, George Eliot, James, Conrad, and Lawrence. Any club exclusive enough to leave out Bloomsbury (though I admired *To the Lighthouse*) commanded my attention.

There were other surprising "nots," too. Leavis did not concentrate on a writer's style: literature was not a kind of French wine, to be sipped. He did not consider art good or bad because it forwarded a particular political end, nor did he treat literature as a kind of puzzle, in which to discern the hidden signs of a culture. He paid scant attention to the evolution of technique in the English novel. He did not care much about the relations between a writer's work and his personal life. Those Leavis "nots" helped clear my eyes. Here was an important critic who pushed aside many of the things that distracted me.

Here was a critic, moreover, with an important "yes." Leavis identified as vital certain elements in the novel that I found appealing. He asked, first, that art be life-affirming—seriously so. He wanted more, in other words, than "life-like characters," a "convincing world," or a cunning entertainment. By asking that art promote "an awareness of the possibilities of life" he did not mean, I was happy to see, drawing corny morals or ending books cheerfully. (Arnold Bennett, he said, was never disturbed enough by life to be a great writer.) He meant doing justice to the scope, the depth, the *roundedness* of life. A book that did so was enriching, whatever the ultimate conclusions of the writer.

To some, this call for a life-affirming art might seem obvious, or a platitude, but it was nothing of the kind to me. The point of view of many ambitious artists in the 1970s struck me as pinched, narcissistic, flashy, even mean-spirited; a pale epiphany was often the most one could hope for. It impressed me that Leavis went so far as to ask for a *reverent* view of life. Not many intellectuals would ask that of art after World War I, or at least not without irony. I was made uneasy by Leavis's repeated use of the word reverence—he did not adequately demonstrate why (or how) art today could be reverent, a problem I will return to—but his implicit challenge to the strain of pessimism in late modernism appealed to me. However justified by events, this pessimism seemed old, cliché-ridden and, at its dreariest, ineffective. A bleak vision attains power when something of consequence is at risk; otherwise its horrors seem redundant, mere news. A reader must say, as he does before a Shakespearian tragedy, "No, no"—and mean "Yes, yes."

Other elements of the Leavis "yes" also excited me. Leavis repeatedly used the words "place," "value," and "discriminate." He wanted writers to position, convincingly, our conflicting claims, desires, and actions; in short, to take the proper measure of life. Much of *The Great Tradition* is a subtle analysis of exactly how great writers draw profound distinctions among values, including competing goods. Like the capacity for reverence, this talent for discrimination did not seem very important in the 1970s. A declining faith in an art of measure was reflected in the styles of disproportion, of exhaustion and extravagance, which today continue to attract attention and respect. Explosive release through sex or violence, for example, was a popular theme. Emotional suffocation was another. Books that did not shout or whimper tended toward the small and sentimental; or were a kind of literary sitcom. So many novels portrayed a wonderfully wacky, perky heroine who had a wry smile, a gamy sex life, and a few poignant adventures. So many featured an adulterous middle-aged man, lovably confused and shaggy—he was often likened to a sheep

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dog—who tripped through life with his pants around his knees. So few attempted a rich and modulated rendering of our ways of living.

Leavis's phrase "moral imagination" illuminated another important part of his "yes." He did not make a sharp distinction, in other words, between formal and moral values. In the novels he admired the two worked together. The writer brought his gift of enchantment to bear on the great human issues; he used his ability to render, to invent, to play, as a means of sparking wisdom into life. The lovely juxtapositions, ironies, and comedy of *Emma,* for example, delightful as they are in themselves, were conceived to enrich our understanding of the moral growth of the heroine. That approach, too, was fairly rare in the 1970s, as it is now. Formal considerations alone, by which I mean skill with language, imagery, and structure, dominated the serious judgment of fiction. Critics could usually be won over by word play and a vivid imagination.

Finally, Leavis's championing of D. H. Lawrence interested me. No doubt he overvalued Lawrence. This may have stemmed, in part, from the acrid resentments of class in England. Neither man was highborn, and each disliked fashionable literary circles. It may have also stemmed from Leavis's tolerance for sermons about the sterility of modern capitalism and the wholeness of an organic society. What impressed me, however, was Leavis's willingness, even determination, to celebrate a (for him) modern writer of radical and contemporary spirit. How extraordinary that a critic who disliked the sexual smirks of Bloomsbury would not shy away from the sexual side of Lawrence! Sex in Lawrence was a means of resurrection, of course, a way to restore warmth and serious feeling to society, which were themes that would appeal to Leavis. Still, Leavis tolerated the explicit treatment of sex, an important aspect of the modern sensibility, before it became fashionable to do so. He was not a reactionary. He did not, like many conservatives, admire the past only to abuse the present.

When I began writing my novel in the late 1970s, the Leavis "yes" helped shape the outcome of arguments I carried on with my own work. I was given to satire, for example; I wanted to skewer the kinds of people (and values) that damaged the kinds of people (and values) I admired. Over time, however, this approach began to trouble me. Anger and bitterness are useful goads to art, but they can also warp the imagination, arousing a desire to hector the reader or pay off a character; and then, almost always, the art turns sour, cold, and small. Here Leavis's "reverence" seemed important. Although determined not to be sentimental, I tried (not always successfully) to sustain my humor and warmth. I opened myself a little—probably not enough—to kinder moments and gentler humors. I wanted to understand, not just attack, my less agreeable characters. And I struggled against flat sentences, an alienated voice, a bleak existentialism.

Leavis's interest in "placing" strengthened my desire to dramatize the cost of (and connections among) current attitudes toward love, success, and celebrity. His interest in the moral imagination, in turn, made me increasingly suspicious of too calculated a search for "newness." Was real originality anything so obvious as formal innovation? A fresh and complex understanding of contemporary life, tellingly rendered, was a better measure of originality; innovations of form should, in any case, derive not from a showy desire for novelty, which underlies most academic fiction, but from a humble determination to tell the truth. Sometimes, in fact, the real originality consisted in avoiding anything too fancy. I found myself becoming suspicious of too brilliant a surface, which often looked derivative and enervating in the waning light of modernism. I distrusted too embroidered a language: it stole attention from the portrayal of character and theme in a novel. My own thinking usually developed inside a thicket of metaphors (I can't help it, even now) but I tried to keep the words fairly plain, or to use their play toward some serious point. The dancing charm of language oth-

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erwise became a distracting, if lovely, vanity.

Perhaps nothing was more important to me, as I started writing, than Leavis's implication that, just as moral values should guide formal play, so, in an artist, character finally means more than talent. The greatest writers are better than their talent, bigger than their obsessions. They display character in how they direct and employ their genius. For example, Flaubert's courage in writing *Madame Bovary*—he risked public rejection with the theme; he struggled to perfect each page—was an act of character. So, however, was the way he treated Emma Bovary. If Flaubert dissected the vulgar romanticism of his period with true genius, Leavis nonetheless joins Henry James and D. H. Lawrence in finding an unbecoming cruelty and scorn in the book. Isn't there something pinched and self-admiring in the way Flaubert handled Emma, whatever her ridiculous pretensions? (Compare George Eliot's compassionate treatment of Casaubon in *Middlemarch*.) And, as James said, *Madame Bovary* arouses a curious feeling of disproportion. Such magnificent artistry—such a mediocre person. This kind of mismatch is one of Flaubert's greatest and most fruitful bequests to modernism, but it may not be as great a human achievement.

How a writer treats himself or his surrogates in fiction also struck me as a matter of character. Nothing is wrong with autobiographical fiction, if the writer's interest in himself is interesting, but I did not trust myself to write it. Such writing often smacks of special pleading: there is something self-indulgent—a weakness of character?—in tugging on the sleeve of a reader like a child yanking at its mother. Even George Eliot could not help idealizing herself, as Leavis demonstrates in *The Great Tradition*. (He considers certain aspects of Dorothea the one spot of serious trouble—serious sentimental trouble—in *Middlemarch*). I remember noticing a related problem, the character of Fanny in *Mansfield Park*. I think Jane Austen, having failed to marry and troubled by the shiny folk from London, was determined to teach herself the value of humility. (Humble Fanny, not the London girl, gets the guy.) So hard did she try, however, that she failed to treat Fanny with her customary irony. As a result, Fanny, a rather limp goody-goody, comes across as too privileged, despite the trials she suffers in the book.

I don't want to overstate this matter of character. The best intentions never saved a writer without talent. And Leavis himself, strict to the point of silliness in his judgment of work without moral power, should have been more tolerant of mere brilliance. Not the least of art's pleasures is the joy of cutting loose—into clouds of lyrical language or sweetly perverse themes. Perhaps there is even a kind of life-affirming dignity, a celebration of freedom, in this letting go, something that Leavis, who lacked a sense of play (and humor), could not understand.

Still, I preferred Leavis's tradition. The writers he admired kept me cheerfully aware of the limits of my character. It pleased me to think that I might one day master my disgust or write in a kinder but still unsentimental spirit. I enjoyed thinking that art required more than the heat of inspiration and twist of intuition, much as I loved those things. In the mind of a novelist, there is another, often overlooked faculty, which might be called the critic in the artist. He is the one who must weigh, challenge, and revise (without killing) what the imagination yields. He may be the most important kind of critic.

I have often thought that D. H. Lawrence lacked just this critical relation to his own extraordinary imagination. Leavis recognized this failing, yet found to admire in Lawrence the novelist another important kind of "criticism"—the way in which Lawrence stood in critical relation to his own time. I was encouraged that Leavis understood, as many conservative critics do not, that a writer must work with the available light; he admired writers who were "sensitive to the stresses of the changing spiritual climate." Certainly I was determined to present the kind of "light" I saw around me, which comes from a culture smitten by celebrity and the cheaper sorts of razzle-dazzle. By

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his interest in Lawrence, however, Leavis also suggested that the values of the great tradition could be forcefully brought into the present. And here I came to my main difficulty.

I wanted to believe, with Leavis, that an artist could do more than reflect his culture. Not much in either late modernism or modern society, however, encourages a strong belief in anything but disconnection and anomie. Oddly enough, anomie may be the principal point of resistance in my generation to what is life-denying in modern culture. It represents a kind of passive resistance, the dead eye in the center of so much meaningless motion. It's not surprising that many novels since the Second World War have been suffused with this anomie: the anomic hero is morally superior to the one who participates gladly in the deadly sparkle. Still, anomie was hardly a satisfactory posture. It was also a cliché in fiction. I wanted, as I think Leavis would have wanted, to show its terrible consequences. I did not want to succumb to anomie any more than to glitter.

Where, however, could I find a reverence that did not seem shopworn or a warmth that did not feel vulgar? How could I develop an art of measure amid so much exaggeration? Or, to put it more bluntly, how could I do so truthfully? It is an old "modern" problem, I know, but as difficult as ever. If the explanations of psychology have eroded our belief in personal responsibility, if moral philosophy no longer seems very important, if movies and television celebrate "personalities" and everyone is to be famous for fifteen minutes, then it's hardly surprising that some writers concentrate on the holy "I"—and turn themselves into billboards. Doesn't an art of flash and shallow characterization and narcissism tell the real truth?

It's easy to take pride in saying no. It's harder to find the conviction, in the art and society around us, to support that no. Leavis himself hardly worried about justifying his view of the world. He had a crusader's spirit: use the sacred flame of literature to attack the infidels and resurrect the true art. But it is simpler for a critic to find such conviction. An artist must work within, not above, his time; otherwise he is just giving a lecture.

I am not sure that an artist today can find the conviction to make the sort of art Leavis admired. Nonetheless, I'll mention three sources of conviction that are important to me. First, telling straightforward stories with a life-affirming spirit—telling stories of moral weight—is so old and serious a practice, so deeply rooted in our imaginations, that I don't believe it can be rendered trite or obsolete. It may be true that our society is too thin-blooded, divided, and complex to sustain a narrative tradition that is both robust and serious. But it is also true that the ennui, doubt, and formal experiment designed to reflect that society now seem pale, hackneyed, and—strangely enough—too young. Writers today might advance by looking back.

Second, a novelist should not surrender his measure and reverence, or abandon his belief in people's responsibility for their actions—or not do so lightly—lest he encourage the values that lead to violence and indifference in the broader culture. I myself think art has this power to damage, albeit in a small way. In particular, an artist may have this unwanted effect by encouraging people to look away from, and disparage, the world of fact. For example, metaphor can be used to enhance and deepen our perception of the facts of the world; for some novelists, however, metaphor can become as important—and finally more important—than the world itself. As a balloon floats free from the hand, so art can slip into its own realm. This may endow art with a marvelous quality of play and freedom. But the loosened link can also make it hermetic and uncaring. Sometimes art becomes a balloon disappearing into the sky.

To many people, this is fitting. Hasn't the world itself become a matter of air? No ground rests under belief; only questions can be stated. Much time is spent examining the meaning of words to see what, if any-

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thing, can be said—"spectacle-cleaning," as Karl Popper called it, in reference to Wittgenstein. From this perspective the traditional novel, with its reliance on straightforward stories and the portrayal of character, looks like an outmoded bourgeois contraption. A writer who has lost interest in this contraption—in character, narrative, and moral perspective—often becomes intrigued by smart conceits: self-display, camp, and cleverness. He finds it difficult to take satisfaction in modest proportions or to feel without pressure. Sometimes, in such circumstances, an artist who is impatient with dandified art develops an intense nostalgia for any feeling whatsoever—and hugely heightens the emotion in his work. (This is true of much Neo-Expressionist painting, where the themes of sex and violence are pushed as far as possible, only to be displaced into style.) Such artists, in short, lose the human scale; they can't address, with a straight face, the essential predicaments of love, pain, loss. If artists do not take a just measure of violence and sex, if they establish no necessary relation between style and substance, is it unfair to ask whether they nurture a society that does the same?

My third source of conviction derives from the nature of art itself. One impulse to make art, a keen impulse, is the separation we feel between the world of our imagination and the world as it is. The imaginary world contains, along with the usual nightmares, a dreamy sense of good: we can picture the edge of Eden. The world at large, of course, confounds our imagination, although there is (along with the daily grind) the occasional kindness, wonderful moment, shared joy. All artists work the seam between the wanting and the having, between the imagination and the actual world. Some writers stress the imaginative; others the world as it is. Perhaps the most interesting, however, illuminate the struggle between the two. Such artists, whether or not their vision is optimistic, whether or not they believe contemporary culture warrants hope, refuse to leave out anything important. They find it necessary to record our sense of good. They inflect their work with the possibility of life. Often, as they sort through the problems of love, ambition, and self-knowledge, there is the hint of an argument—the desire to make of our public and private worlds a better fit.

There may be one last reason why, even today, one can hope for an art of moral weight. In their lives writers are no more moral than other people, perhaps less so. But before a blank piece of paper—well, there's such a thing as the morality of the page. There, as before the key issues of life, choice is paramount. The morality of the page consists in trying to "place," in the Leavis way, everything as exactly and truthfully as possible. This begins with choosing the right words: a phrase that captures its bit of truth is a moral act. The process continues when the writer places the broader relations of theme and character in his book. It continues still further when he places his art in relation to life itself, by asking what end his art will serve. The answer "art itself" sounds too small.

Would my work have been much different if I had never read Leavis? Perhaps not. Reading novels, great and otherwise, affected me as much as reading Leavis did; even more important were those things that came unbidden, the characters and images seeking their right relation. Still, I was a writer who needed an intellectual perspective in which to place his work. Leavis clarified the tradition in the novel that I admired. He encouraged me to be ambitious, in a serious way. He helped me—to use a phrase he liked—declare my hostages. Yet I'm not certain, sometimes, how well I understood him. Would Leavis recognize his influence in my work? Or find his ideas correctly expressed in this essay? I rarely quote him and seem mostly interested in my own problems. But perhaps I don't owe him an apology. In a great critic, a young writer hopes to find himself. In doing so, he may change the critic—and himself.

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Max Beckmann: the later work

by Dan Hofstadter

Max Beckmann is the bad boy of modern art. Though few would question his historical position, many an educated taste has objected to the truculence, harsh linearity, and unappealing surfaces of his art. The current retrospective in St. Louis should serve as a corrective to this view.[1] The show is especially strong in the works created by Beckmann during his nearly three decades in Frankfurt. Arriving there fresh from the Western Front, where he'd made many drawings of carnage and mayhem, he felt indisposed to take up the gory history painting that had won him renown before the First World War. By degrees he turned instead toward pictures that were often medium-sized, personal in nature, and almost French in delicacy of color and handling. In so doing he arrived at a quieter art that was strong in the middle range—in the expression of quotidian friendships and domestic problems—and that at times seemed like a painted chronicle of his life.

Beckmann's Frankfurt period began in 1915, when he moved to that charming riverine city after being invalided out of the Reichswehr medical corps. It ended in 1933, when he was dismissed under Nazi pressure from his teaching position at the Städelsches Kunstinstitut and moved back to Berlin, his old home from before the war. During this long period he showed his work frequently and won wide acclaim as an artist and teacher; he also painted some of his finest pictures. The first of these is *The Night,* an airless, nearly monochromatic image of a family's brutal destruction by hoodlums; the last is *Departure,* a brightly colored prophetic allegory of a family's argosy in quest of freedom.

The ascent from *The Night* to *Departure* is marked, like some great palace stairway, by narrative figure groups that often dazzle people into bypassing the artist's many drawn and painted portraits of this period. I refer not to the self-portraits but to the portraits of other people. Beckmann's first really original picture of somebody else is his *Portrait of Fridel Battenberg,* executed in 1920. This image of a woman holding a cat belongs to a traditional genre, that of the sitter with a pet animal or bird. Beckmann retrieves the genre for modernity by using a format so tall and narrow that the compressed "space" around the subject's head retains its surface tension instead of turning into the remote mush of the old-fashioned portrait background. Fridel herself looks just like the sort of tense city woman who'd do perfectly for a modern try at the intrin-

1 "Max Beckmann—Retrospective" will be on view at the Saint Louis Art Museum until November 4 before travelling to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where it will be on view from December 9 to February 3, 1985. For a discussion of Beckmann's early years, see my article, "The Beckmann retrospective: the early work," which appeared in the October issue of *The New Criterion.*

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sically conservative genre of the portrait. She was probably Beckmann's dearest friend at this period: from 1915 on he was a frequent visitor to her and her husband Ugi's home.

Beckmann had met Fridel as a student in Weimar. About four years older than he, she was a keyboard artist and composer known in Frankfurt artistic circles for her sagacity and selflessness. She died in 1965, and their correspondence has not been made public. Yet looking at Beckmann's many likenesses of her from the early Frankfurt period, we feel that we obscurely know her. Her dark troubled eyes appear in a wonderful pencil portrait, in an etching called *Evening with Battenbergs,* in a funny drypoint called *The Yawners,* and in two important paintings, the unfinished *Resurrection* and *Company III: Family Battenberg,* now lost. Most of these works are on display at the current retrospective, which offers alongside a large selection of the paintings a strong survey of the drawings and graphics.

Scrutinizing Beckmann's drawings of Fridel and of his other friends of this period, you feel that his pencil has really been around: it has poked back into the Middle Ages to serve an apprenticeship with the elder Holbein, then picked up a trick or two at *Simplicissimus,* the brilliantly illustrated Munich satirical review. Beckmann has Holbein's sly silliness and deceptively simple sense for head placement on the page; he also has the contemporary cartoonist's cruel instinct for facial eccentricity and gestural self-betrayal. The artist even caricatures space itself, as if he had eyes like a fish's or a bird's, while at the same time distorting scale so intensely that his images seem not miniaturizations but autonomous realms of existence. Likenesses are pushed through a series of images, as they are in illustrated books, so that we recognize Fridel and Ugi and Max in scene after scene. Their blown-up visages knock about on their dwarf bodies like hand-puppets bobbing on a stage, the heads and hands working perfectly together, the ill-matched eyes staring out with a wounded-animal expression. Max becomes a skull with a clacking mandible, Ugi peers into his cognac glass and deliquesces, Fridel presses her temples so her eyes pop; now their faces crumple into yawns; a woman's hands secede from her body and play solitaire by themselves; a boy turns into a rodent.

There are at least two big ways in which drawings like these often serve as forerunners to paintings. With its relative speed and spontaneity of execution the act of drawing may enable an artist to try out an idea that might still be too uncertain to warrant working out on canvas. Such drawings are usually called "sketches." But there is another way that drawings can be harbingers of a whole shift in style. Because the hand holding a drawing tool can readily respond to daydreams or impressions, the marks it makes can reflect a new range of interests months or even years before those ideas find expression in paint. Beckmann's war drawings were of this type: some of them body forth images that were not to be clothed in color for another three or so years. Yet the path from the drawings to the paintings was not, most of the time, deliberate, but a mazy meander; what's curious is the human scenery en route. Why is it, for instance, that the first scrawled germ of an idea for *The Night* shows a *man* murdered in a brothel, while the final painting shows a sexual violation of a *woman*? Each one of us may nurse his own hypothesis, but I suspect that scholarhsip will never provide a final answer: we see the ripples, no longer the rock that caused them. What Beckmann's group-portrait drawings do clearly herald, however, is a growing interest in the social drama of art, in plot and characterization. He's like a playwright who knows some interesting people and is going to tell us their story, which is why his extraordinary ability to catch and maintain a likeness through a series of pictures is so important. In a style of painting that isn't otherwise very realistic, this is his humorous way of letting us recognize his world. Look, he seems to be saying, this is *about us*; and though that "us" at first includes the poignant and exemplary figure of Fridel Battenberg, it is soon enough restricted—most

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of the time anyway—to the real principals of the play, namely Max and his women.

When in 1920 Beckmann wrote an "artist's statement" for the *Tribüne der Kunst und Zeit,* he titled it "Creative Confession." By this time his work had in fact become largely confessional and would remain so until the first triptych, *Departure* of 1933-1935, in which the allegorical element begins to outweigh the confessional one. The biographical nature of the Frankfurt paintings poses a great question: Is an extra-pictorial key required to unlock these pictures? The huge catalogue for the St. Louis show[2] is ambiguous on the subject, promising only that the master's work will be discussed "in such a way that the public at large is given an opportunity for continued interpretation." Evidently we're to believe that the catalogue writers have all the answers but have been educational enough to refrain from providing them. Yet I for one found myself scratching my head more often at their commentaries than at the paintings: in case after case the iconographic impulse has been too swiftly, too grossly indulged. Yet the problem is real: these pictures cry out for interpretation. This is something which it nettles me to say, and which flies in the face of every wise thing I've ever heard about painting, the conventional wisdom being that painting needn't and can't be explained but only more or less vividly or urgently apprehended, perhaps with a certain metaphorical decorum. The last thing that could help explain a picture, for instance, is the life of the man who made it; however fascinating that life may be in its own right, and whatever it might suggest about the artist's work or social environment, it can't be allowed to obstruct our judgment of that work. As I visited and revisited the Beckmann show, however, I found myself drawn more and more—against my will and with some resentment—to the autobiographical aspects of the Frankfurt pictures. It didn't take me long to realize who the real villain was: I'd snapped up a hook baited by Beckmann himself.

At this point I suppose I'd better briefly explain what I mean by the "interpretation" of a narrative picture. I grew up believing that the old masters depended on stories from say Ovid or the Bible to work up their compositions, whereas the moderns had freed themselves from all that, transcended it. The moderns could just let their figure groups bloom out of their daemonic unconscious, or whatever you want to call it. Hence their paintings were purer and more mysterious, enigmatic "like life itself." Then I got to know some of the old masters a bit better, and I realized that masterpieces like Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece (which by the way had a profound impact on Beckmann) were just as mysterious as any Cubist or Surrealist picture—had just as much "strangeness in the measure." Every single thing in Grünewald's great triptych of the Crucifixion could probably be explained, yet there it sat at Colmar—the epicene angel sawing away at the cello, the imp crashing through the bull's-eye window—as ineffable as could be. What made it so mysterious? It couldn't be the story, nor the anatomy of the angel—Guido Reni offered angels aplenty, but no *frissons* for this tourist—so it had to be the way it was done. There was no meaningful sense in which Grünewald had been less (or more) "pure" a painter than such admirable modern creators of secular triptychs as Beckmann or Matisse or Jean Hélion. Everything was in the intervals, the space, the colors, the plastic values—I mean the way the bulk or the feel of objects was translated into something a little unreal, poeticized. At the Beckmann exhibition I began to see how Beckmann, by using likeness to identify his subjects, had left crude clues all over the place, so the tale became clearer and clear, more and more banal, till at length it revealed itself to be merely "the same old story" on which the modern confession is usually pegged—namely, a divorce.

2 The English-language edition of the catalogue, *Max Beckmann: Retrospective,* was published by The Saint Louis Art Museum in association with Prestel-Verlag in Munich and W. W. Norton in New York: 483 pages, $30.

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The divorce—or better put, the gradual estrangement of a man from his wife—wasn't at all interesting, for no particulars were supplied. Much more mysterious was the manner as a whole, especially the emblematic rightness of the relation of figure to figure. Beckmann, in other words, was telling his tale with visual and with personal authority, like someone who did not find life so very enigmatic after all, but comprehended how it might be squarely pictorialized. This is a middle-aged attitude; he was getting middle-aged. The strangest thing about the paintings, then, is not their supposed indecipherability but their metaphorical rightness. Such rightness is always strange—and rare. Modernism, with its cult of ambiguity, has indulged the delusion that our motives are mysterious even to ourselves. Beckmann's gallows humor—like that of Hogarth, who struck him as a kindred soul and whose work is retrospectively clarified by Beckmann's—ridicules this soft notion. His vulgar frankness, like that of the stand-up comic or the omniscient concierge, deflates such pretensions and forces our motives—lust, sloth, greed, vanity—back into clearly labeled cans. When he draws himself as a "yawner" he's just another coarse lout who's too lazy to go to bed.

The first person in Beckmann's family to show up as a regular clue in his Frankfurt compositions is—aside from himself, of course—his son Peter. In the drypoint, *Family Scene,* and the lithograph *The Family,* both of which are contemporaneous with *The Night,* Peter appears as a young boy with long straight blond hair in a Dutch cut; we get to recognize him, to know who he is. Thus when he turns up in *The Night* itself, oddly aged and feminized, as a sort of human package being swiped by a crook in a "proletarian" cap, we realize that he must be intended for the son of the couple in the painting. That is why he is waving goodbye to them in such an agonized way. Yet I'm bothered by the fact that he actually looks like a little old lady, vexed that in order to interpret this painting I must fetch information from outside its own world; but that is just what Beckmann makes you do. I suppose I shouldn't be any more vexed than I am when I have to figure out who the Virgin is in "primitive" devotional paintings by searching for the woman in "Mary-mantle blue." Be that as it may, Beckmann was an exceptionally programmatic painter by any standards; he constructed many of his images around preconceived "theosophical" symbols, and if those images' metaphorical organization wasn't clear enough he'd just scrawl something loaded like *Zeitung* or *Sortie* on them to help himself out. When one of his patrons, Lilly von Schnitzler, told him how hard it would be for her to live with the cruel scenes on the side panels of the triptych *Departure* in her sitting room, he gave her a pretty explicit explanation of the scary symbols there and why the panels couldn't be jettisoned. To judge by the weight of the exhibition's catalogue, Beckmann's grandiloquent self-advocacy was far from the last word on this topic. Yet before tackling the riddle of a Beckmann picture it's best to ask how much of a riddle it really is; this can save a lot of energy.

The first major portrait of a woman that Beckmann undertook after the picture of Fridel Battenberg shows a reserved-looking blonde in black velvet sitting before a mirror. With its rich blacks and grays and flesh-tones, its subtly rendered mouth, and its strongly delineated gesture of the arms, this painting of his wife Minna is an example of a certain sort of fine, modest, very coloristic Beckmann which, like the drawings, is still undervalued in this country. In the year that he painted this canvas he also executed one of his most startling figure compositions, an Italian beach scene called *Lido.* Beneath a sky of luminous gray, as if recently clouded over, a deep green sea hurls itself toward us. Dismay grips the three oversized marionette-like people who have presumably been lolling in the waves. A woman tenses her shoulders against the breakers; a figure of indistinct sex raises both its hands in apparent supplication; and a man inverted by the force of the water, his legs stiffened and splayed like a corpse's, reaches downward

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to catch onto something or to soften his impact against the sand. The breakers themselves are very entertainingly painted, in a way that seems to me almost medieval, like the waves around a shipwreck on a limestone capital. With its long horizontal lines of foam like white piping on layered hems, the green sea becomes a vast skirt garbing many people at once. It has an insidious mind of its own, billowing up till the Renaissance palazzi on the far shore seem like toy houses tossed in its folds. The green sea comes and it wraps itself around the midriff of the poor upside-down man, making him wonder where his lower parts are, making him look like a drag queen. With his beautiful simple warm flesh tones he floats before us, an inverted Christ; apparently about to strike a piece of flotsam he looks—with his frozen stiffness or premature rigor mortis—like a piece of human flotsam himself. Meanwhile two women are walking on the beach in the foreground. One of them is striding right past us in the middle of the scene, in profile, looking neither to the right nor to the left. She wears a sort of toga trimmed with scarlet, thong sandals, and a cloche hat—an obscurely ritualistic vestment, you might say. The other woman has just passed her and is hurrying out of the picture; she wears a striped swimsuit and a Turkish towel wound once around her head like a burnous or a cowl. All we can see is her eyes. Unlike the first woman she turns to look at us in passing.

There are two curious things about the spatial arrangement of this composition. Because the traditions of perspective aren't observed here, and all the puppet-like figures seem to jerk about in nearly the same plane, the upside-down man in the water is as large as the woman trotting obliviously by in the cloche hat. He looks strangely suspended beside her. This artifice of juxtaposing a male and a female figure pointing in opposite directions Beckmann had already used a few times and would use many times in the future. If there were a heraldry of sexual woe or marital misfortune, as there is a trick of grafting the blazons of spouses together, this emblem—man with head at woman's feet and vice versa—would do perfectly for a heraldic device. I suppose the idea is very old—upside-down and standing figures are juxtaposed on a carved pillar in the Romanesque abbey church at Souillac—but Beckmann resuscitated it and gave it something like logo status in his production. Too physical and sensuous to be translated into words, it nonetheless arouses similar emotions in most of us.

The other really peculiar thing about this painting happens in the ragtag patch of space between the two foreground ladies. Beckmann is generally very inventive with interstices, with visual transactions half-shadowed or screened by tall forms. In this case the two women's backs block from view the gesticulating arms of the person behind them, whose hands nonetheless can be seen reemerging over the women's shoulders and perching there like autonomous avian monsters. For a moment it looks like each foreground woman is sprouting a weird little brown wing. The effect is crude and funny; it conjures up a whole web of potential meanings.

To be emotionally attuned to this painting, you have to imagine that you *are* the upside-down man, because he is by far the most endangered and alarmed person in it and hence the center of its consciousness. And I think if you were in his skin, you'd want a little sympathy, if not outright assistance. You'd wonder why those women on the beach haven't noticed that you've lost control of your body and are about to go under. "Hey you in the cloche hat!" you'd shout, perhaps a little hysterically, "I'm going to drown, and you just walk on by!" Poor abandoned male! It is the familiar male nightmare, the familiar cry, the familiar female passing callously on. Sometimes, though, as I admire this goofy painting in reproduction and chuckle to myself, it seems to me that the sea isn't so dangerous after all, and the upside-down man is a water athlete who knows just what he's doing, and he likes to run a bit of a risk now and then, as strong men supposedly do, to get the girls'

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attention; maybe he's really a buffoon who likes to wallow in the shoals and wait for the wind to blow up so he can look like he's run into trouble. Yet such behavior is only another form of distress. However you look at him, the upside-down man seems activated by the coming and going of women; and if you wanted to you might well be able to identify the two women, by the turban and the cloche hat, as Beckmann's estranged wife, Minna, and his new love, Quappi.

That is perhaps putting too fine a point on it. What seems indisputable to me, though, is Beckmann's feeling for color and for the uses of the middle-sized canvas (*Lido* is ninety centimeters long) during this period. Nice old-fashioned middle-sized canvases are so good for dream paintings, I always think—it seems they give the artist a chance to sleepwalk a bit without indulging any propensities to oneiric grandiosity. He's spared problems of enlargement, too, and the drudgery of massive alterations.

I like all the middle-sized and smallish portraits of the Frankfurt period, like *An Old Actress, Duchess of Malvedi,* and *Quappi in Blue.* How underrated Beckmann is as a portraitist! The color is always rare and sure in these pictures, and something like high diplomacy can be glimpsed in the *entente cordiale* of format, scale, and pose. But the greatest portrait of this period is surely the *Double-Portrait Carnival* of 1925, known to generations of Beckmann-worshipping art-students as "the marriage picture." To paint one's own marriage picture is, of course, a great idea, which is why it is so often assigned to students. It gets them involved in the visualization of something they really care about. Paint yourself with your spouse or your sweetie or a parent or a really good friend—that's the problem. But in order to understand how splendidly Beckmann handled this double-portrait theme, we must first retrace our steps and see how it came about that the man who married Minna Tube in 1906 also married Mathilde von Kaulbach in 1925.

The truth is that Beckmann hadn't really lived with Minna since 1914. He taught in Frankfurt, she sang with the Graz Opera (which had engaged her in 1918), and neither seemed inclined to move. He travelled often to Graz, but nonetheless their relations grew rather strained. Then, in the spring of 1924, something peculiar happened. Beckmann met another singer in Vienna, the youngest daughter of the painter August Friedrich von Kaulbach. Named Mathilde but called "Quappi" by everyone, this girl was about the same age Minna had been when he'd met her. That summer Max and Minna and their son Peter took a seaside holiday at Pirano, near Trieste, which is where he got the idea for *Lido.* Evidently the couple did not grow closer together. Early the next year Quappi received an offer to sing for the Dresden Staatsoper, which, as she informed Max, she would decline for his sake. Minna agreed to a divorce, and on September 1, 1925, Quappi and Max were wedded. One woman, as it seemed, had given him up for song; now another would give up song for him.

Double-Portrait Carnival was imagined in response to this new marriage, and seems largely a confession of doubt as to its sacramental or even serious nature. Thus it pushes further in the self-revelatory direction already suggested by pictures like *The Night* and *Lido.* But the relation of man to woman has now become the explicit and indeed the only theme. Quappi and Max are depicted on a largish canvas (160 centimeters tall) emerging from the wings of a circus tent. They are dressed as clowns. He wears a tight violet costume and a white skull cap like a head bandage or the bathing cap of the upside-down man in *Lido*; she wears trousers and a military hat and is outfitted from the waist down with a sort of papier mâché pony, an otherworldly spotted dreaming creature. Bride and groom make identical hand gestures, as lovers often do, but she seems impatient and strides ahead, pointing to the arena where they are to perform, while he lags behind, hesitant. The image is an evident play on the old theme of a centaur's abduction of a woman, only here the woman is the centaur and the man her

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passive partner. Who shall "mount" whom, we wonder. Man, woman, and paper pony are compositionally conjugated more tightly than is usual in Beckmann; there is something about the threesome that reminds me of medieval stone capitals or Anglo-Saxon verse conundrums. Beckmann has caught a touching quality in Quappi's expression, the deep set of the eyes and an anxious tightness around the upper lip. Best of all are the rich hues, the balance of warms and cools, the exact proportion of blacks to grays; as a colorist Beckmann equalled Matisse at this time.

The sexual theme was further developed in the richly colored *Gypsy Woman, Reclining Nude,* and *Parisian Carnival*—Beckmann and his new wife were spending lots of time in Paris now, where he absorbed the lesson of Matisse. I wonder if he saw Matisse's great picture *The Moroccans* before painting *The Bath* in 1930. Something in *The Bath*'s contrast of ochres and blacks, in its use of flat wall decoration and a sweeping, slightly simple-minded *repoussoir* puts one in mind of the French masterpiece. Whereas Matisse had already sunk to prettifying the sexual impulse, though, to building a seraglio around it, Beckmann stripped it of its lushness and left it stark and menacing. *The Bath* does not show odalisks at the harem baths but an ordinary European couple in a bathroom. Stretched out in the tub with the inevitable bathing cap on, his back turned to the viewer, the man appears upside down. Beside him stands the woman. Lifting one thigh so that her pubis is nearly exposed she dries herself with a Turkish towel which is also wound about her head like a burnous or a cowl. She's the same half-naked, half-concealed woman-in-a-towel whom we saw hurrying out of the picture called *Lido*; now as then her turban-like garb reveals only a tiny triangle of face, but this time it has slipped below the mouth so we can see who she is. In *Lido* she was anonymous; here she is recognizably Minna Beckmann-Tube, the artist's ex-wife, whom we recognize from the 1924 portrait. Collapsed by foreshortening above an opulent expanse of flesh, her tiny triangular countenance seems to grieve and shrink in its hood. Her foot rests on the man's body, and he covers his crotch with his hands, one of which holds a cigarette. *Lido* was a jocose, faintly obscene inverted crucifixion with lady Pharisees instead of lady saints; *The Bath* is the closest Beckmann ever came to the realism of domestic life, to Ibsen let us say; the erotic connection (or its absence) is not allegorized here but offered up as a ghastly carnal pantomime. It was five years after his divorce. Did the artist create this image as a way of coming to terms with an old but still painful alienation from a beloved being?

Within two months of Hitler's accession to power in 1933, Beckmann was dismissed from the Frankfurt Städelschule. That same year, in Berlin, he began to work on his first triptych, *Departure.* I must unhappily report that it is impossible to get a broad overview of Beckmann's late period—1933 to 1950—from the present retrospective. The artist's major effort of this phase was a series of nine triptychs only four of which were secured for the current show. Those who saw the 1980-81 Whitechapel Art Gallery exhibition of the complete triptychs must count themselves lucky; the rest of us can have little persuasive to say about the late Beckmann. Doubtless the organizers of the Munich-St. Louis retrospective cannot be faulted for failing to borrow what people wouldn't lend, but what may bother many of us a bit is the catalogue's lack of interest in Beckmann's place in the genealogy of forms. I for one am curious about the obvious influence of El Greco and Goya on the young Beckmann. After all, El Greco had lately been "rediscovered," and Goya's "Black Paintings" at the decaying Quinta del Sordo had only recently been snatched, with some fanfare, from the jaws of destruction. What of Hogarth, whom Beckmann adored? Or Hans Baldung Grien? What of his passion for Bosch and Breughel and Ensor, for Grünewald and Cranach and Memling? And if, as seems highly probable, somebody has made a study of the extraordinary resem-

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blance between his vertical figure groups and the confounded souls on the left side of Christ in Holbein the Elder's resurrection scenes—one of which is at the Städelsches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt—then I at least would like to know about it. It might have been interesting too if someone had related Beckmann to his contemporaries—to Kokoschka, for example, or to Rilke, Kafka, or Döblin.

In *Departure,* the concluding picture of the Frankfurt phase and the first of the new phase of internal and then literal exile, Beckmann's confessional urge ebbs and his old prophetic strain returns. The side panels of this secular triptych present reworked versions of the cruel symbols from *The Night* and *Lido*—the torture-victim, the raped woman, the upside-down man—but the central panel depicts a royal family in search of freedom on the high seas: this picture is not primarily about the erotic tie but about destiny. Yet Beckmann was a prophet of the antinomian ilk, and in the years ahead he would smear the big men as Elijah smeared Omri, even blaspheming God "for making us unable to love one another." Beckmann's visual prophesies are rather garbled of course—what else could you expect from an upside-down man?—but some of his pictures did actually predict the course of events. He managed to keep his mouth above water in the moral current of history, and escaped the Nazi flood-tide unscathed. Yet there was nothing supernatural-seeming about him: the ordinary course of God's punishments and plagues could have furnished him every assurance that his presentiments were true. Luckily for us he had the poetic or figurative faculty to put them on canvas. Max Beckmann was a great insomniac, and is known to have slept very little during his last forty years; how ironic it is, then, and how it teases the mind, that he is the most persuasive dream-teller in the modern canon.

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Henry James: assailed by the perceptions

by Joseph Epstein

After prolonged engagement with the works of Henry James, one not uncommonly discovers oneself attempting to strike off lovely looping sentences, sentences that seem to unravel without themselves *quite* becoming unraveled, pausing, immitigably, for the oddest adverbial interpositions, pausing again, mitigably, for the most dazzlingly elaborate metaphors, sentences that are dipped, even drenched in the most delicious irony, yet, for all this oh so fragile verbal freight, churn merrily along their way, still full of steam and cadence, to close on some slightly oblique but nonetheless utterly deft perception. I parody, but, after having arisen from reading the four volumes of the *Henry James Letters,* the last of which has just been published,[1] who wouldn't? The Henry James prose style, though surely no disease, is nevertheless highly communicable. In life anyone long exposed to Henry James seemed to pick up the Jamesian prose vibrations. In his day James had his conscious imitators, among them the journalist Morton Fullerton and the belletrist Percy Lubbock. Even James's last typist-secretary, Miss Theodora Bosanquet, in her slender volume *Henry James at Work* reeled off a number of very James-like sentences. James himself in the end became implacably Jamesian. Miss Bosanquet reports: "by 1909, when the play [*The Outcry*] was written, the men and women of Henry James could talk only in the manner of their creator."

Love it or loathe it, the late style of Henry James is *sui generis.* It is also the great issue in James's career as an artist. Simply formulated, the issue is this: Is the late style of Henry James, more than a bit of a muchness, altogether too much? Would James have done better to have stayed with the elegant yet still not so insistently parenthetical style of, say, *The Portrait of a Lady*? Not to put too delicate a point on it, Did Henry James cut it too fine? At the outset, this much can be said with confidence: No one ever wrote English prose as Henry James did and no one ever will again. Other writers have made a firm impress with a distinctive style. In this century, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Ernest Hemingway wrote English prose each in his own distinctive way, yet in every case the style was an invention, a work of artifice. But Henry James's style was nothing of the sort. James wrote as he thought and thought as he wrote—between his mind and his pen there appears to have been no slack whatsoever. Buffon's famous formulation, "le style est l'homme même," for once really does seem to apply; between Henry James the man and Henry James the writer the congruence was complete.

Strong evidence for this assertion is to be

1 *Henry James Letters Volume IV, 1895-1916,* edited by Leon Edel; Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 864 pages, $30. The three previous volumes of James letters, covering the years 1843-1875, 1875-1883, and 1883-1895, are also edited by Leon Edel and published by Harvard University Press.

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found in the way Henry James spoke. It was Buffon (again) who said, "Those who write as they speak, even though they speak well, write badly." But James, in a reversal on Buffon, seems often to have attempted to speak as he wrote. The results could often be, to put it softly, immensely inconvenient. "He was a great hesitater, you know, the greatest of hesitaters," recalled Max Beerbohm, who was a great James parodist, you know, the greatest of James parodists. After Edith Wharton introduced James to Finley Peter Dunne, the creator of Mr. Dooley, Dunne commented: "What a pity it takes him so long to say anything. Everything he said was splendid but I felt like telling him all the time: 'Just 'pit it right up into Popper's hand.'" Ford Madox Ford once described hearing James speaking to his, Ford's, housemaid outside the window of his study, "going on and on interminably . . . with the effect of a long murmuring of bees."

But to the people who adored James, his hesitations, his parentheses, his circumgyrations, held their own fascinations. Edith Wharton, who adored and admired James, wrote of his conversation: "To James's intimates, however, these elaborate hesitations, far from being an obstacle, were like a cobweb bridge flung from his mind to theirs, an invisible passage over which one knew that silver-footed ironies, veiled jokes, tiptoe malices, were stealing to explode a huge laugh at one's feet. This moment of suspense, in which there was time to watch the forces of malice and merriment assembling over the mobile landscape of his face, was perhaps the rarest of all in the unique experience of a talk with Henry James."

Such, then, was Henry James the talker, at least late in his life. But as James's talk grew more involuted, trying at times even the patience of admirers such as Edith Wharton, so, in middle age, did his prose style grow more intricate. One explanation sometimes put forth for the increasing complexity of James's style is the advent in his life of the typewriter. In 1896, when James was fifty-three, he developed writer's cramp, in response to which he called upon the services of a typist to whom he dictated his books, journalism, and all but his most private correspondence. For the rest of his days he continued to avail himself of a typist. "If I could only write as I might talk," James began a sentence to his brother when both were young men and Henry felt the rush of impressions upon him, a rush whose current was too strong for his pen to keep pace with. Now, though, with a typist at the ready, he was able to "talk" his writing.

Talk flows more easily than penmanship, or even than typewritermanship, assuming the author himself at the typewriter. The natural fatigue of fingers and wrist that cause one when writing or typing to wish to come to the end of a sentence disappears when one talks one's writing. Talk rolls and flows, lasting quite as long as breath; and even the need for breath may be satisfied by a semi-colon stop, after which one may roll on and on. Although James frequently excused himself to his correspondents for writing in "Remingtonese," he doubtless greatly enjoyed dictating to a typist, for talking his writing gave full freedom to his impulse to qualify, his hyper-subtlety, his need for utmost clarity, and his endless pursuit of nuance. Yet allowing for all that dictating his books permitted James, one must go on to allow for James's own abiding love of complexity per se. "I glory in the piling up of complications of every sort," James once told his niece, adding, "If I could pronounce the name James in any different or more elaborate way I should be in favor of doing so." Writing by dictation did not so much change Henry James's style as give full vent to it.

Whence derived this love of complexity in Henry James? After one allows for his high intelligence, his susceptibility to impressions, his verbal gifts, one still hasn't accounted for James's love of complexity. One can only begin to do so by gaining some elementary sense of that remarkable machine, the mind of Henry James. It was a mind of rare receptivity. Of James, Ethel Coburn Mayne wrote: "I have never beheld,

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for my part, any creature who struck me as to his degree assailed by the perceptions." Begin, then, with a mind "assailed by the perceptions" (a very Jamesian sounding phrase), and now add T. S. Eliot's notion that Henry James "had a mind so fine no idea could violate it." Please note that Eliot writes not "penetrate" but "violate." James could handle general ideas with considerable facility, and he could do so from a fairly early age, as his youthful letters show. It happens that general ideas were not what interested him; richer, more serious truths, for Henry James, were to be discovered elsewhere. Eliot, who thought James "the most intelligent man of his generation," had James very much in mind when he wrote that "instead of thinking without our feelings [as James did] . . . we corrupt our feelings with ideas." We are talking here about sensibility, that ill-defined and perhaps indefinable quality whose constituent elements are feelings, perceptions, refinement, and taste, for Henry James's was pre-eminently a mind dominated by sensibility, and such a mind, itself fine-grained, tends toward shadings, subtleties, nuances, complexity.

George Santayana, whose mind resided in this same realm of sensibility, records another aspect of Henry James in his autobiography. Santayana had met James only once, when James was already an older man. Logan Pearsall Smith and his sister Mary Berenson had arranged the meeting. Of James, Santayana writes: "Those were his last years and I never saw him again. Nevertheless in that one interview he made me feel more at home and better understood than his brother William ever had done in the long years of our acquaintance. Henry was calm, he liked to see things as they are, and be free afterwards to imagine how they might have been. We talked about different countries as places of residence. He was of course subtle and bland, appreciative of all points of view, and amused at their limitations." What a telling formulation—"appreciative of all points of view, and amused at their limitations"—and what it tells is a very great deal about James's simultaneous interest in and detachment from life. That Santayana spotted this quality in Henry James is not so surprising. It takes one, as they say, to know one.

What was Henry James's own point of view, and in what ways did this point of view contribute to his penchant for complexity? James's nationality—or, more precisely, his lack of nationality—is significant here. It was T. S. Eliot who remarked, "I do not suppose that anyone who is not an American can *properly* appreciate James." Yet it was Eliot, too, who apropos of James, noted: "It is the final perfection, the consummation of an American to become, not an Englishman, but a European—something which no born European, no person of any European nationality, can become." This is of course exactly what James did do—turn himself into a European, but of no known country. He penetrated ample segments of three European cultures: English, French, and Italian. He walked about with two full languages in his head; his command of French appears to have been that of a native speaker. Miss Bosanquet says that James "was never really English or American or even Cosmopolitan." Although he became a British citizen at the close of his life, Henry James was, as an artist of sensibility, supranational. As such, his point of view was never that of an American or Englishman merely; it was above and beyond that; his was the point of view of the pure artist.

But finally Henry James required a complex, fine-textured style because he had a complex, fine-textured mind. One of the many pleasures of reading through Leon Edel's handsomely produced, intelligently edited, chronologically arranged four volumes of *Henry James Letters* is in witnessing the mind of James grow more complex and more finely textured. Not that this took very long. Henry James was very smart very young. He had the advantage of having been born into a cultivated family, whose father was freed, by his own father's commercial cunning, from the responsibility of having to earn a living. Henry James, Sr., travelled

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Europe with his family in tow, and his children took a goodly portion of their early schooling in Paris, Geneva, London, and Bonn. Henry was never a superior student; future artists often aren't. He went at things in his own way, and grew up mentally storing his sensations, accruing his impressions, perpetually sharpening his observational powers. He had another advantage: he knew early that he wanted to be a writer. In this line he was fiercely, unrelentingly ambitious. One can say with fair confidence that every important decision Henry James made in his life—to live in Europe, never to marry, to move out of and then later back into London—was a decision dictated above all by the needs of his art. Complicated though life may have seemed through the eyes of Henry James, in this wise at least it was simple—art, his art, came first.

When Henry James was a small boy one of his tutors could make out no special aptitudes in him, and could commend him only on a pleasing translation into English of some of the fables of La Fontaine. Never much good at games, Henry James was nonetheless from an early age an exceptional verbal athlete. His youthful letters show a boy who could play wonderfully with language, tossing it about, using it ironically, dotting in the occasional French phrase, achieving sweet comic effects. Thus, at age seventeen, toward the close of a letter to his boyhood friend Thomas Sergeant Perry, James writes: "According to my usual habit, having fully satisfied my egotism, I turn to humbler themes. Pray how may *you* be?" He was well on his way, as he might put it, to "taking possession" of the English language. At twenty, once more writing to Thomas Sergeant Perry, James describes listening in church to a hell and damnation preacher and remarks upon how the day of such men is done. "The brimstone fizzles up in the pulpit but fades away into the musk and cologne water in the pews." That is pretty damn good, and James knew it was sufficiently to joke about it, for after this line, in parentheses, he notes: "(Don't it strike you that I am very epigrammatic?)"

I referred to Henry James as an exceptional verbal athlete, by which I mean someone who can really play the language, ringing a wide variety of effects from it, ranging over a vast field of moods, registering the most subtle modulations. The verbal athletes are the great natural writers: they have power over the language and consciousness of this power and joy in the consciousness. For them writing is a species of intellectual play; they do not grumble about its difficulties, but turn to it with expectant pleasure. Because they take such pleasure in composition, they are generally highly fertile in their creation. In English the great verbal athletes, in my view, have been: Chaucer, Sir Thomas Browne, Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, Sterne, Dickens, James Joyce, and (a single foreigner) Vladimir Nabokov. The special quality in all of these writers is the joy that one can sense their own writing must have given them. Henry James is of their number.

One of the several delights of the *Henry James Letters* is the opportunity it provides to watch James the verbal artist in performance. Letters are form free, and under but a single constraint—not to be dull. Over four volumes, Henry James's letters rarely are. He more than once describes them as "mere gracious twaddle." True, they are sometimes twaddle; true they are never less than gracious; but they are never "mere." Attention must be paid to them at all times, for no letter is without its fine touch, however pedestrian the subject. Describing poor weather in Rome to his mother, James writes: "Rain in Rome brings out the dirt as darkness does a photographer's negative . . . ." Or of walking through the Louvre with Emerson, James, not yet thirty years old, remarks: "his perception of art is not, I think, naturally keen; and Concord can't have done much to quicken it." Or this one-sentence description of Mrs. William Morris, favorite subject of Rossetti, whom James first encounters at age twenty-six: "Imagine a tall lean woman in a long dress of some dead purple stuff, guiltless of hoops (or of anything else, I should say), with a mass of

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crisp black hair heaped into great wavy projections on each of her temples, a thin pale face, a pair of strange sad, deep, dark Swinburnish eyes, with great thick black oblique brows, joined in the middle and tucking themselves away under her hair, a mouth like the 'Oriana' in our illustrated Tennyson, a long neck, without any collar, and in lieu thereof some dozen strings of outlandish beads—in fine Complete." In Rome for the first time, he reports back that he has seen "the Tiber hurrying along as swift and dirty as history." The mind of the young Henry James swarms with impressions, emotions, and sensations, observations, insights, and fine formulations. Yet to his brother William he writes: "I never manage to write but a very small fraction of what has originally occurred to me." In this same letter, lauding the energy of Michelangelo ("energy—positiveness—courage,—call it what you will"), he notes that this energy alone marks the true man of action in art and disjoins the artist from the critic. Could Henry James have already been thinking of himself when he made this observation? It would scarcely be surprising if he had.

Nothing improves the style like actually having subjects to expend it upon. Reading through the first volume of the *Henry James Letters,* one sometimes feels that the problem presented to Henry James by America was that it didn't sufficiently stimulate the artist in him; the young Henry James in America resembles nothing quite so much as a boy who has mastered the higher calculus forced to attend a school where his classmates are working away at addition and subtraction. "Try to be a young man upon whom nothing is lost," runs a well-known James quotation. If ever there was such a young man, he was Henry James. At the age of twenty-two he wrote a review of *Essays in Criticism* that the book's author, Matthew Arnold, praised. In his middle twenties he could meet and take the correct measure of such men as Mark Pattison ("a desiccated old scholar, torpid even to incivility with too much learning") and John Ruskin (who "has been scared back by the grim face of reality into the world of unreason and illusion, and . . . wanders there without a compass and a guide—or any light save the fitful flashes of his beautiful genius"). When he meets George Eliot—"this great horse-faced blue-stocking"—he knows, at the age of twenty-six, that he has met the real thing: "Altogether, she has a larger circumference than any woman I have ever seen." This notion of the circumference of a human being is one that recurs in James; later, in his early thirties, he will remark that he is able intellectually to see all around Flaubert. Once again, like a superior athlete, James needed always freshly to test himself —not his muscles, of course, but his mind— and America in the 1870s simply did not offer a gymnasium well enough equipped to provide him with the kind of literary workout he required.

We know from Leon Edel's five-volume biography of Henry James about James as a dutiful and loving son and as the best of good brothers; from the same splendid biography we know, set out in careful detail, the itinerary and chronology of James's life. The *Henry James Letters* add the dimension of allowing a sustained look at James's mind and style as it developed over a lifetime. Although more than 2,300 pages, Professor Edel's four volumes of the *Henry James Letters* are very far from all the letters James wrote. These volumes constitute a selection of James's letters, chosen, as Leon Edel reports, "either because they are documentary, throw light on character or personality, or furnish a picture of family background." Professor Edel adds that he has used "literary content" as his chief criterion in making his selection, with an emphasis on those letters that reveal Henry James the artist and professional writer.

Over a long career as a biographer and editor, Leon Edel has served Henry James extremely well. Certainly he has done an admirable job with the *Henry James Letters.* As editor, he has been self-effacing, writing short and always helpful introductory sections within each of the four volumes. He has chosen the letters so that the redundancy

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factor from letter to letter is very low. He has permitted none of the barbed wire of modern scholarly apparatus to be erected around the text of the letters. His editorial footnotes are minimal, brief, helpfully explanatory. He has wisely left intact snobbish remarks and anti-Semitic allusions. In almost every other way above his social class, in this latter respect James was, alas, very much a member of his social class—no, none of his best friends was Jewish—though with the passing of years the number of these allusions lessens and lessens and finally disappears.

As for snobbery, in a man of James's abilities the charge is not so easily leveled. A snob is someone who arrogates superiority to himself in order to look down upon others. But what if he is—as James was—truly superior? James's snobbery had nothing to do with social class. The form his snobbery took was to look down upon the thoughtless and unfeeling. While in Rome, still a young man, he writes that the "sight-seeing barbarians are oppressively numerous"; yet the society of Cambridge, Massachusetts, that of his own social class, he also found wanting, and describes its women as "provincial, common and inelegant." Yet one mustn't understand Henry James too quickly. As soon as one marks him down as a snob, one recalls that in Gilbert Osmond he drew one of the most devastating portraits of a snob in all of literature. One recalls, too, his beautifully imaginative, that is to say his utterly sympathetic, treatment of Hyacinth Robinson and other of the working-class characters in *The Princess Casamassima.* If James was a snob, it was about spiritual decency that he was snobbish, for he looked down upon those who didn't possess it. Desmond MacCarthy once put this same point rather differently when he said that, in the fiction of Henry James, only the good are beautiful and there is no shortcut to being good.

But the glory of the *Henry James Letters* is the account its volumes provide of the organization of the life of a major literary artist. I am unaware of the existence in literary annals of anything quite like it. James was a graphomaniac. "I live with my pen in my hand," he wrote, and in his instance this was no mere figure of speech. When he wasn't writing—and he wrote for the better part of his life every morning through lunch (a meal he once referred to as "that matutinal crime") and then often again late at night, seven days a week (in his professional life he abolished the Sabbath)—he was out gathering impressions and experience for still more writing. He knew that "life is effort, unremittingly repeated." He also knew the kind of writer he didn't want to be: "I have a moral horror of seeming to write thin"; and he knew the kind of writer he couldn't be even if he wanted: "a free-going and light-paced enough writer to please the multitude." He viewed himself as a literary artist but one who had the unshakable temperament of the professional writer. To Charles Eliot Norton, his first editor, then at the *North American Review,* he notes that "experience will cure me of the tendency to waste my substance upon worthless subjects, and teach me to write cheaply about cheap writing." Later, now earning his livelihood as a writer, he complains about "my slow and laborious writing," yet expresses confidence that "with practice I shall learn to write more briskly and naturally."

Had he set his mind to it, Henry James could have been illustrious at two or three different branches of writing. He might easily have made his way—and his name—as a literary critic, and indeed as a young man he wrote to his friend Thomas Sergeant Perry: "Deep in the timorous recesses of my being is a vague desire to do for our dear old English letters and writers *something* of what Sainte-Beuve and the best French critics have done for theirs." Of course, James did write a great deal of literary criticism, much of it by the way and to help earn his livelihood, though as he grew older he wrote—excluding the prefaces to the New York edition of his novels and tales—less and less criticism. What is perhaps not so well known is that Henry James could doubtless have set up as a professional art critic. For an

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example of how strong he was in this line one has only to read his early letters to his brother William about the great renaissance masters in Venice, Florence, and Rome. When he later wrote about some of these same painters in the *Nation,* John Ruskin was so moved by it that he told Charles Eliot Norton that he wished James had been appointed Slade Professor of Fine Arts at Cambridge.

"To produce some little exemplary works of art is my narrow and lowly dream," James, not yet thirty, wrote to his friend Grace Norton. There was of course nothing either narrow or lowly about this dream. James hugely admired the amplitude of Balzac's career, after which in some respects he modeled his own, and he tended to think of the literary artist, Napoleonically, as a conquering figure. Before many more years passed he would allow that "my dream is to arrive at the ability to be, in some degree, [England's] moral portrait-painter." As James entered his thirties, these dreams slowly began to come to realization. He took up permanent residence in Europe, first living in Rome, then in Paris, finally settling in London, of which he wrote: "You can live elsewhere *before* you have lived here—but not after."

In Europe he begins in earnest his genre-juggling regimen of writing criticism and journalism while putting his major energies into his fiction. "I find as I grow older," he writes to William Dean Howells, who throughout his career is so honorably receptive to James's writing, "that the only serious work I can do is in story-spinning." In Paris he comes to know Turgenev, whom he admires as an artist but even more as a man: "his whole aspect and temperament [are] of a larger and manlier kind than I have ever yet encountered in a scribbler." His confidence in his own literary abilities grows; so does his critical acumen; and his observations become correspondingly sharper. "Renan is hideous and charming—more hideous even than his photos, and more charming even than his writing." Walter Pater is "far from being as beautiful as his prose." He meets Matthew Arnold in Rome, with whom he shares small talk, and about whom he writes home: "It remained small-talk and he did nothing to make it *big,* as my youthful dreams would have promised me." The twaddler grows ever more gracious, learning to combine sweet malice with flattery, as when he writes to his sister-in-law Alice, wife of William, apropos of Josiah Royce: "I shall never, in future, embrace a man's philosophy till I have seen him—and above all till I have seen his wife," adding, "You see that William's own doctrines are by this system very well guaranteed."

"Mysterious and incontrollable (even to one's self) is the growth of one's mind," James wrote not long after his thirtieth birthday. "Little by little, I trust, my abilities will catch up with my ambitions." In point of fact, he would spend the remainder of his life making sure that they, his abilities, do precisely that. But his chief problem would be not his abilities but the ability of his audience to keep up with him. Henry James was neither an avant-garde writer nor a writer out to *épater* his audience in any way. Yet, fairly early in his career, he was presented with the prospect of having to lower his artistic sights in order to hit the large audience that he would have liked but found himself quite unwilling to accommodate. This man so assailed by the perceptions would never in his lifetime find a large audience prepared to be similarly assailed. When Howells suggests that James might give greater pleasure to readers if he would conclude *The American,* which Howells was then serializing in *The Atlantic,* by bringing about a marriage between Christopher Newman and Mme de Cintré, James makes clear to Howells that his job is not to provide such ready gratification: "Such readers have a right to their entertainment, but I don't believe it is in me to give them, in a satisfactory way, what they require." Earlier, when he supplied *The New York Tribune* with a regular cultural letter from Paris, James had to be warned against aiming his writing too high. The editor, a decent sort, told James that his letters from Paris were simply too

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lofty for the readers of a New York newspaper. Once again James gave no serious thought to stooping to conquer. "If my letters have been 'too good,'" he replied, "I am honestly afraid they are the poorest I can do, especially for the money!" All this might come under the rubric of the Integrity Question, except that for Henry James there was no question about it. He believed that it was his job to write as well as he could, while it was his readers' job to keep up with him.

Uncompromising though he was about his art, Henry James nonetheless had his run. The novella *Daisy Miller* brought him a *succès de scandale.* In the late 1870s he seemed perpetually to have a novel being serialized, sometimes simultaneously in English and American magazines. "My fame indeed seems to do very well everywhere," he wrote to Howells, "it is only my fortune that leaves to be desired." Money would never cease to be a problem for him. At this period the bulk of his earnings came from magazine writing. He described his book royalties to Frederick Macmillan, his English publisher, as "the reverse of copious." He had by now moved to London, taking up rooms first on Bolton Street; later he would move to 34 De Vere Gardens, where Robert Browning was his neighbor. To his artistic success was joined a social success: by the 1880s he is dining out among such varied but grand company as Gladstone, Balfour, and Pasteur. Earlier, he ardently wishes to become a member of the Reform Club and succeeds. "*J'y suis, j'y suis*—for ever and a day," he writes to his father on his admittance. One social season, that of 1878-79, he dined out, by his own reckoning, no fewer than one hundred and seven times. Soon enough he will tire of this vigorous social round, struggling as hard to get out of society as some people do to get into it; and at one point, writing to his sister about his yearning for solitude, he notes how he longs for doing "without the need of swallowing inscrutable *entrées* and tugging at the relaxed bell-rope of one's brain for a feeble tinkle of conversation."

With "inscrutable *entrées*" and "the relaxed bell-rope of one's brain" still firmly in mind, perhaps this is the place to insert a point that seems to have escaped generations of Henry James readers but that arises unmistakably in his letters—the point I have in mind is that Henry James was a very funny man. Sometimes his humor will emerge from his phrasings, as when he speaks of his "mountain of 'correspondential' arrears," or describes the room from which he is writing in his bachelor quarters at Rye as "my little old celibatoirean oak parlor," or refers to one Mrs. Greville as part of a family "who form a positive *bouquet* of fools." More often, his comedy derives from his gentle sense of the absurd. After witnessing a ballet in Milan, he writes of "the interminable adventures of a danseuse who went through every possible alternation of human experience on the points of her toes." Sometimes he will stop a sentence to comment on the silliness of words themselves: "I went over to Dover (what a language we have, 'over to Dover'—it would have made Flaubert an even greater maniac than his own did) . . . ." Much of Jamesian comedy simply comes from sharp observation: "There are surely bad races and good races, just as there are bad people and good people, and the Irish belong to the category of the impossible." (James himself, of course, came of Irish ancestry.) He can be very funny on the literary manner of the French: "I saw Daudet who is slowly dying and making a book out of it, and Coppée who is slowly living and doing the same." Of Paul Bourget he notes: "*Bourget est tragique—mais est-il sérieux?*" What James called his own "tender chord of perception" turns out to have been threaded with laughter. Here it has to be said that the comic view is at the center of James's vision; and for anyone who cannot comprehend James's comic gifts the works of Henry James figure to remain a hopeless puzzle.

James would have need of his humor along with all his other estimable resources in the years that lay ahead. Although his artistic powers increased, beginning in the 1880s

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the audience for his work began to dwindle. After *The Portrait of a Lady,* which at least earned critical acclaim, James's next two novels, *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima,* fell flat, both critically and financially. He now began to find it more and more difficult to write stories to the relatively brief length magazine editors desired. Meanwhile, the commercial success of inferior writers turned him purple with rage. "What you tell me of the success of [Frances Marion] Crawford's last novel sickens and almost paralyzes me," he writes to Howells. At the same time, doubt about his own prowess begins to creep into his letters. "It's always the fault of my things that the head and the trunk are too big and the legs too short." And: "Yes, I reflect too much—or not enough; I don't know which. I ought, that is, to go either much further, or not so far." The demand for his work is reduced to zero—and below zero when a man named Horace Elisha Scudder, Howells's replacement as editor of the *Atlantic,* rejects James's great story "The Pupil." The result is to jolt his confidence severely.

It is now, in 1890, with the hope of achieving "fame and shekels," that Henry James turns to writing for the theater. The story of James's writing for the theater is one of alternating doubts and hopes, oh such towering hopes—hopes that will come rudely crashing down, leaving him spiritually crushed. Leon Edel has provided the definitive account of James's theatrical adventures in the third and fourth volumes of his biography. These adventures culminated with the London production of James's play, *Guy Domville.* The audience for the first night of the play—"a brutal mob," as James referred to them in correspondence—"hooted" the play off the stage. At the close of the performance, jeers and catcalls from the gallery were met by applause from James's friends in the audience. When George Alexander, whose company had produced the play and who had himself acted in it, came before the curtain to say that "these discordant notes tonight have hurt me very much" and that, if he and his company had failed, they "can only try to deserve your kindness" by doing better in the future, a voice in the gallery shot back: "'Tain't your fault, guv'nor, it's a rotten play." One can easily enough imagine James's reaction—and shudder.

What is remarkable about Henry James's experience in writing for the theater is that it marks the first time he was deceived about his own art, or indeed about any art whatsoever. As one reads through James's correspondence, one notices that—despite all the graciousness, despite all the twaddle—the one thing he cannot be merely polite about is art. When sent books by friends or admirers, he duly finds items to praise in them, but at some point in all such letters he shifts gears and turns on the criticism—and the criticism is invariably more persuasive than the praise. The problem, he claims, is that he cannot read a novel without rewriting it as he goes along. "The novel I can *only* read," he writes to Mrs. Humphry Ward, "I can't read at all!" To Howard Sturgis, after subjecting him to a critical workout, he writes: "I am a bad person, really, to expose 'fictitious work' to . . . ."

But it is not only "fictitious work" he is candid about. Some of the funniest letters in the final volume of the *Henry James Letters* are those to the young sculptor Hendrik Andersen, toward whom it is now claimed James had homoerotic feelings. But these feelings, if in fact they existed, did not interfere with James's running critical devastations of Andersen's penchant for creating outsized nude statues. James begins, gently, by hoping that Andersen will soon turn away from such work and toward a "*smaller* masterpiece, the condensed, consummate, caressed, intensely filled-out thing." But in later letters he refers to Andersen's "great nude army"; and after advising Andersen to try his hand at other subject matter, he writes: "I won't send you any fig-leaves—I need them all myself; besides your ladies great heaving and straining and gentlemen would split them in twain at the end of an hour."

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Henry James was fifty-two years old at the time of his theatrical debacle and felt himself completely demoralized. The time had come either to go under or to pick himself up off the floor. In a splendid letter to William Dean Howells, he recounts his condition. The magazine editors no longer want him. "A new generation, that I know not, and mainly prize not, had taken universal possession. The sense of being utterly out of it had weighed me down." He feels he has wasted time, in recent years, because of his theatrical preoccupation, and produced too little. He tells himself, "Produce again—produce; produce better than ever, and all will yet be well." Now, no longer interested in magazine serialization, which has at all events been rendered hopeless by the lack of interest in his work, he decides to turn to the "production of the little *book* pure and simple," the thought of which leaves him serene. And this is precisely what he will do, concentrate his remaining energies on writing the very best books he can. As he will later write to Paul Bourget: "For myself, more than ever, our famous 'Art' is the one refuge and sanatorium." Herewith Henry James enters his major phase.

Henry James's last years are a triumph, but a triumph of a curiously qualified kind. The chief qualification is that he will die, in 1916, not really knowing how triumphant he has been. In a brief span of years, he wrote *The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove,* and *The Golden Bowl,* the masterpieces of his last years. Yet in 1911, in a letter to Edith Wharton, he refers to *The Golden Bowl* as "the most arduous and thankless task I ever set myself." By "thankless" he means unappreciated. The smallness of his audience, though he pretends otherwise, is forever troubling to him. It wounds him that not even his supremely intelligent brother William thinks well of his late novels, and at one point he ironically promises him that he will someday produce a novel "on the two-and-two-makes-four system," to which his brother's tastes seem to run. He writes as if resigned to being without a large public for his work. He might call the public "a big Booby"; he writes to friends to say that he no longer worries about its indifference to his work or its inability to understand it; still, one feels he should greatly have preferred to have had that big Booby on his side.

The loneliness of the long-distance artist—such seems an appropriate caption to the picture presented in the *Henry James Letters* of their author's last years. These are the years of rustification at Lamb House in Rye, Sussex, to which James signed a twenty-one-year lease in 1897. For a man who was a very good friend—"It seems impossible to dislike him," Stephen Crane said. "He is so kind to everybody"—James seems, in his last years, oddly friendless. Part of the reason for this is that he felt himself the last surviving member of the circle around Flaubert, and hence now quite without contemporaries. But in greater part he withdrew more and more within himself. His love of travel grew less, though in 1904 he set out on the trip to the United States that resulted in *The American Scene.* He still made visits and had visitors, but work more than ever consumed him. In these years he became, as he writes of a character in one of his stories, "a being organized for literature."

Never for a moment does he lose interest in his art. "Nothing, all the same," he writes to Ford Madox (then) Hueffer, "is ever more interesting to me than the consideration, with those who care and see, or want to, of these bottomless questions of How and Why and Whence and *What*—in connection with the mystery of one's craft." Yet he knows that "those who care and see, or want to" are a very small minority. In praising Joseph Conrad to Edmund Gosse, he cannot help adding: "Unhappily, to be very serious and subtle isn't one of the paths to fortune." He received renewed affirmation of this in his own case when the New York edition of his novels and tales, on which he had labored long, flopped financially—"a sort of miniature Ozymandias," he calls it. He sensed that not even his friends read his work. Miss Bosanquet reports: "He found it safest to assume that nobody read him, and

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he liked his friends none the worse for their incapacity."

Yet it isn't quite accurate to say that nobody read or understood Henry James in his last years. Henry Nash Smith, in a recent work of scholarship, *Democracy and the Novel: Popular Resistance to Classic American Writers,* provides an account of the critical reception of Henry James's mature novels and of their author's reputation that shows a mixed reaction. Scarcely surprisingly, many critics reacted to James's work with irritation of the kind shown by William P. Trent, founding editor of the *Sewanee Review,* who, in a review of *The Awkward Age,* wrote: "if psychological analysis has to be carried to a point of subtlety considerably beyond any attempted by Shakespeare or Balzac, and if conversations and character analysis are the two poles around which the ellipse of modern fiction is to be drawn—we are willing to commend the novels of to-day to the careful attention of students of advanced mathematics, and shall content ourselves hereafter with the simple old novelists who were unsophisticated enough to write straightforward stories." Others complained that James's novels were too circuitous, too analytic, too laden with psychological suggestion and reticences. Yet a small band of critics—most of them, interestingly, women—did understand what James was getting at; they understood that he had abandoned conventional action in literature in the attempt to get at deeper realities and psychological complexities by tracing events to their secret sources in the heart, there to mine a richer truth about human character than anyone had yet worked. Still, the number of people who understood and appreciated James remains small—and, even though James has long since been picked up for teaching purposes in contemporary universities, it still is. In the nature of the case, it probably always will be.

"It is art that makes life," Henry James said, and the people who believe this will always adore Henry James as one of the great heroes of art, not only for the art he provided but for the example his own life set. It is all the more gratifying to those of us who think of him thus that, as we now know from his letters, he practiced what he preached—that, in fact, art made life for him. Despite his manifold disappointments, despite the many illnesses of his last years—gout, dark depression, shingles, angina—Henry James never lost his passionate interest in life. Henry Adams, James's contemporary and a man provided with all the advantages life can confer, went sour on life. But not James, who, in old age, accounting for his ever freshened interest in life, wrote to Adams: "It's I suppose because I am that queer monster, the artist, an obstinate finality, an inexhaustible sensibility." Henry James is one of those rare writers who does not seem more petty, abject, or repulsive the closer one looks into his life. On the death of his friend Turgenev, James wrote to Edmund Gosse: "Yes, I too like what I read better when I know (and like) the author." The four volumes of *Henry James Letters* cause one wholeheartedly to concur, with only a slight emendation: the word "like" needs to be changed to "love."

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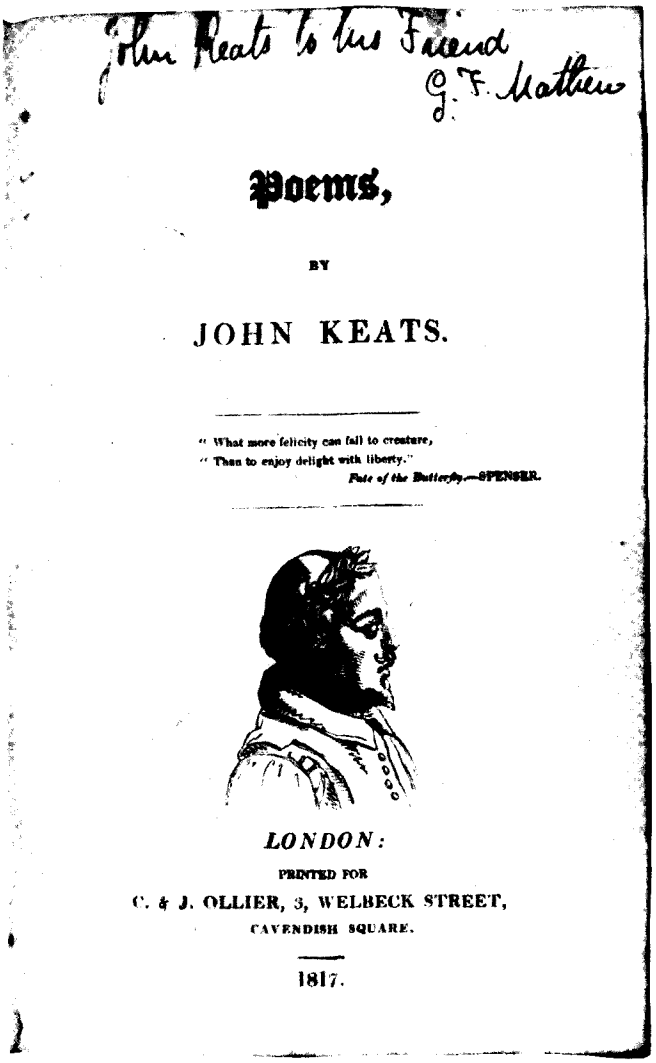
John Keats to his Friend
G. F. Mathews

Poems,

BY

JOHN KEATS.

" What more felicity can fall to creature,
" Than to enjoy delight with liberty."
Fate of the Butterfly.—SPENSER.

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John Keats, *Poems*, London, 1817. First Edition. Inscribed to George Felton Mathews.

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Poems *by Paul Mariani, Leslie Norris, & Richard Kenney*

Cleaning out the cellar

Time once more to clean the cellar out,
to thin the brace of cataleptic bikes,
the moldy bats and gloves, the brown-edged news,
the cardboard boxes stacked in grainy light:
things kept against a time which never comes.
Like those mummy notebooks bloated
with my dead professors' gnomic axioms.
So much *Angst* expended once
on the dusty air of accident and form.
The cellar holds its mummy time intact:
a box of old tax ledgers, a disassembled wheel,
one chipped claw hammer and three large nails,
this cookie tray of broken Christmas bulbs,
my lost dog's cracked green plastic supper bowl
kept these eighteen months in case his bones
should ever lope their way back home.

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In this flyblown print of Dürer's *Melencolia,*
each thing sits apart, insists on keeping
to itself. An angel twiddles with a large
twin iron compass, sideways glowers
at a falling star. The scales clink empty
in the breeze above his head. Each broad
surface of the granite polyhedron, whether in
or out of shadow, insists *I am, I am,*
I am, as sand sifts down the hourglass
and dust seems to measure dust.
a batfaced serpent, mouth agape, grips
its needle teeth about the word:
the mirror meaning of the melancholy whole.

A seawracked, seascummed catalogue
of things to number on the fingers
of the mind, then lug grunting up
the cellar steps to cart the load away.
O blessèd Abelard and good St. Freud,
subtle masters of the windy sound,
O you who understood how words
were thresholds of the terrible sublime,
the inverted image dancing in the lake,
in the final count worth a trunk
of tens and twenties minted Richmond,
April, 1865, *if* you can hear me
as you circumambulate about the brilliant
dark as if at ease at last,
the word a dream of dancing things,
the dream become the dancing Word itself,
remember me as rooting in my cellar,
counting on my fingers and my toes.

—*Paul Mariani*

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The hawk climbs

The hawk climbs, and climbing,
seems to hang for ever;

but he too passes over the hill.
Once I found a hawk's skull,

stern dry hook and bone,
unchanged for centuries,

perfected. Yet the seasons
took him, for all his mastery.

I look through the hawk's clean lens
for an essence I guess at,

the place where his circling ends
and nothing turns into the dark.

Fieldmice under leaves, speckled
pebbles, I can see them,

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and the small dust kicked up
by boys running to school.

I can feel the hard growing
in the bones of such children.

There's not a movement
in the country of my eyes

which is not counted. But where
are the lean young men who live

for ever? How far are the fields
where broken ponies run, their legs

whole again? Where is the green country
which put an end to time?

I shall search with the hawk's eye
until that land is found.

—Leslie Norris

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Inertia

Equinox again. Day's end—I sit,
at rest, with whiskey, on the porch—
and nightfall, equal, opposite—
and ponder ostriches who, planted
earthwise, feathered as this orchard
is, have donned their planetary
helmet, fishbowl helmet, upside
down. So dizzying. I wish
I understood the calendar
that turns me too, as blind, as blind—
What rest we keep relinquishing!
Now apple trees are paper lanterns
candled by the sun behind
them. Winter, soon. They tear. Wind-torn
a few of them reveal the wick
itself, before it dies. A few spent
bees lift off the porch light, turn
a dazed ecliptic down. They walk
a little on the cold cement;
by morning they'll have died, no doubt.
By spring the lantern's light blown out
may light anew, and trees will mend,
as orchard comes to bloom again—
I skirt the bees on my way inside.
I circle too, you see; I'll ride
the slight curve generated here
out to the very end, to bed,
where breath will fail to close the sphere
of dark-to-light around my head—
Hush, hush, you'll say, *the harsher laws*
of motion, dear, can never govern
our emotion. Loss by loss,
so love conserves—So love's vernier
is at your touch. I feel its solace
settle here—your arms by turns
encircle me, to stillness, nearly,
for a moment, nightfall turbanned
round and round . . . A vernal solstice
at the soul. And then again the veer—

—Richard Kenney

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Photography

Ansel Adams: the politics of natural space

by Andy Grundberg

When Ansel Adams died in April 1984 he was the best-known and most widely admired photographer in the United States, if not the world. In the last decade of his life he maintained the high profile of a public figure—appearing on television in automobile advertisements and in print on the cover of *Time,* being interviewed by *Playboy,* having a private audience with President Reagan—and his photographs took on the status of public monuments. His 1941 image "Moonrise, Hernandez" became the hit of the auction and collecting world in the late Seventies, but public taste gravitated equally to his classic images of Yosemite valley, including "Monolith, The Face of Half Dome" of 1927 and "Clearing Winter Storm" of 1944. For all the popular acclaim and critical plaudits during his lifetime, however, the exact nature of his aesthetic achievement is remarkably unresolved.

Adams was not innocent of aspiring to be the world-famous photographer he became. His celebrity was no doubt enhanced by his having cultivated an image as the grand old man of the West, complete with Gabby Hayes visage and frontier demeanor, and by his lifelong efforts at publicizing and promoting the medium in which he worked. He befriended historian Beaumont Newhall and Newhall's wife, Nancy, a writer, early on, helped them and David McAlpin found the photography department of the Museum of Modern Art in 1940, established a department to teach photography at the San Francisco Art Institute after World War II, and in 1967 founded the Friends of Photography near his home in Carmel, California. In 1977 he provided the funds to endow the Beaumont and Nancy Newhall Curatorial Fellowship at the Museum of Modern Art.

In addition, Adams was the author of more than thirty-five books, some devoted to his pictures and some purely technical, and of a substantial number of articles and reviews, dating back to the 1930s, that advance the cause of the "photographic" in photography. He also was a figure in conservation circles, serving as a Sierra Club director from 1936 to 1970 and advocating the preservation of wilderness areas and national parks. Given such a record of activity, it is not surprising that he managed to be a respected senior figure in the photography community. Still, what made Adams so popular in the public mind first and foremost was his photography—especially those images that show the natural site as a majestic and indomitable force impervious to the depredations of weather and tourism alike.

These pictures are among the most visually imposing, dramatically printed images of twentieth-century photography. (Ironically, they are most often seen as reproductions, in books and magazines and on posters and postcards.) They reveal a dedication to the craft of photographic printmaking that finds its nearest equivalent in the turn-of-the-century Pictorialist era, when hand-

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applied emulsions and arcane toners were employed to achieve a misty, painterly "look." Yet Adams's photographs are otherwise diametrically opposed to the values of Pictorialism. If they have any precedent in the medium's traditions, it is the straightforward, richly detailed early Western frontier views of William Henry Jackson, Timothy O'Sullivan and Carleton Watkins. They are minutely descriptive in a way that seems transparently documentary, and they depict a topography that has yet to show the traces of human occupation.

But unlike those nineteenth-century pioneers of American landscape photography, whose views more often than not suggest that the natural world is totally alien and inhospitable, Adams pictured nature as *scenery*. In his landscape images, the natural world presents itself for human delectation; whatever threatening quality its sharp cliffs, precipitous gorges and compacted thunderheads may have had is by and large neutralized and neutered. As I had occasion to observe in reviewing the Museum of Modern Art's 1979 exhibition "Ansel Adams and the West," in Adams's universe the moon seems always to be rising and storms always to be clearing—symptoms, it would seem, of Adams's essentially modernist optimism about the future of the human spirit.

There is, however, another aspect to Adams's landscape photography: It shows us a natural world so precisely ordered and so cleansed of ills that we might suspect it had been sanitized by a cosmic disinfecting agent in advance of the photographer's appearance on the scene. This fundamentally hygenic conception of the world is apparent not only in Adams's pictures but also in the ways in which he discussed the particular style of photography to which he was devoted. While he disliked the term "Purist" to describe this style, purity was essential to it. Writing in the photography magazine *Camera Craft* in 1940, he spoke of his commitment to "a clean, straightforward approach to photography." Elsewhere he wrote of the need for "clean standards" to capture the "vigor"and "virility" of the natural world.

That this yearning for the hygenic also extended to nature is clear from a 1922 letter to his future wife, Virginia, in which he wrote, "I long for the high places—they are so clean and pure and untouched." In the same letter, which is quoted in Nancy Newhall's admiring 1963 biography *The Eloquent Light,* Adams complains about the crowds in the Yosemite valley—crowds that are never seen in his photographs—and says: "How I wish that the Valley could be now like it was forty years ago,—a pure wilderness, with only a wagon road through it, and no automobiles nor mobs."

A similar desire for purity may lie behind his almost fetishistic concentration on craft, which in the 1930s led him to develop a systematic procedure for "pre-visualizing" the final printed image while the exposure was being made. Called the Zone System, it enabled Adams to adjust his exposure and development times to produce negatives ideally suited for enlargement—and, most important for Adams, negatives that contained within them the germ of his original "vision" of the subject. Adams was not the first photographer to place a high value on visualizing the final image in advance, any more than he was the first to swear allegiance to sharply focused and finely detailed prints (his friend Edward Weston, for one, preceded him on both counts), but he was the first to combine the science of sensitometry with the aesthetic of the expressive photograph.

Vision, for Adams, was what transcended technique and justified calling photography an art form. "A great photograph," he wrote in a document called "A Personal Credo" in 1944, "is a full expression of what one feels about what is being photographed." To rationalize the notion that a straight, unmanipulated print could express the personal vision of its maker as fully as any picture or painting made entirely by the hand of an artist, Adams drew upon the already existing aesthetic of the Equivalent, as conceived by Alfred Stieglitz. Stieglitz held that photo-

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graphs, besides being documents of what they are of, are expressions of something else—that something else being the vision or feeling of the photographer.

For all its virtues in making us engage photographs more closely and complexly, the aesthetic of the Equivalent as it developed from Stieglitz through Adams and Minor White has one major shortcoming: after asserting that an apparently transparent image of the world is imbued with an individual vision or feeling, it has difficulty defining what that vision or feeling is. Used as a critical instrument, the theory of Equivalence is unable to determine any intended meaning in a photograph. But as a credo, it has served as the dominant aesthetic of American photographic modernist practice. Its assumptions are enshrined not only in the photography of Adams, Stieglitz, Strand, Weston *et al.* but also in Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present* (1937), which serves as today's gospel of the photographic tradition.

Not surprisingly, Adams throughout his life refused to speak of the meanings of his pictures—preferring, presumably, to let them speak for themselves. But if Adams's pictures are expressive, as he made clear he intended them to be, the criticism of modernist photography has yet to describe what they are expressive of. If they are equivalents of the artist's deepest feelings, what are those feelings? As the photographer Robert Adams has written in regard to Minor White's imagery, "Sooner or later, one has to ask of all pictures what kind of life they promote."

Mr. Newhall, in the 1964 edition of his history, has this to say about Adams's accomplishment: "Mr. Adams, in his photography, his writing and his teaching, has brilliantly demonstrated the capabilities of straight photography as a medium of expression." Of the Adams images shown at Stieglitz's American Place gallery in 1936, Mr. Newhall says that they "had sensitivity and direct, honest integrity that were rare" (sic). Today, these efforts at getting to Adams's importance seem not unlike the kind of evasions ambivalent critics sometimes undertake. But Mr. Newhall, a longtime ally of Adams's, is not alone in stopping short of telling us what Adams achieves in his pictures. One can search all the panegyrical commentary on the photographer's work and not find a single description of the meaning of Adams's vision of the natural world—or, for that matter, any clue as to what his unmatched technical brilliance allowed him to express.

The silence, coupled with the absence of any body of criticism that takes issue with the work, is what has left Adams's place in the art of this century surprisingly unsettled. One sign of this was the large degree of misinformation that accompanied the tributes marking his death this spring. Some obituary writers hailed him as the inventor of "straight" photography, others as the pioneer of Purist style, still others as the originator of the crisply delineated "f/64" style. More than one editorial claimed that he had revealed the splendors of Yosemite to us for the first time. Even so circumspect an historian as Peter Bunnell let hyperbole exceed clear judgment when he wrote that Adams "fundamentally altered our conception of photographic picture making in the twentieth century." (This last appeared in the newsletter of the Friends of Photography, an organization Adams founded, so Mr. Bunnell might be excused.)

The truth is, Adams came on the scene too late to pioneer the style in which he worked. "Straight" photography was already being discussed as early as 1901 by the critic Charles Caffin, a member of Stieglitz's early circle. "Purism" was first developed in the years following World War I by Paul Strand and Edward Steichen and was arrived at more or less independently by Edward Weston in Mexico in the mid 1920s—at a time when Adams was deciding to devote himself full time to photographing Yosemite National Park. As was clear from the Museum of Modern Art's 1979 exhibition of Adams's Yosemite work, "Ansel Adams and the West," Adams's early silver prints (which he called "Parmelian prints") have a small,

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self-consciously arty look to them; it was only in 1930, the year Paul Strand showed Adams his photographs, that Adams's pictures began to acquire the dramatic contrasts and expansive scale of his mature work. Through the Thirties and Forties he worked in close proximity to Weston, whose more abstractionist dramatic style no doubt strengthened Adams's commitment to Purist practice.

As for who first showed the splendors of Yosemite to the American public, we have to go back to the mid-nineteenth century, when wet-plate photographers such as C. L. Weed, Carleton Watkins, and Eadweard Muybridge made the arduous journey into what then was unsurveyed territory. Watkins in particular was devoted to the Yosemite landscape, visiting it several times throughout his career with both mammoth-plate and stereo cameras. Adams himself recognized their precedents, claiming allegiance to them as a way of rejecting his immediate Pictorialist inheritance. In Adams's photographs, however, we see Yosemite *as if* for the first time—his conception of it is so different from that of the nineteenth-century landscape photographers that Yosemite seems remade.

Perhaps the person who has come closest to suggesting the nature of Adams's accomplishment as a picture maker is John Szarkowski, director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art and the curator of "Ansel Adams and the West." In his wall label for that exhibition he wrote, "He is the last of those Romantic artists who have seen the great spaces of the wilderness as a metaphor for freedom and heroic aspirations." Here we can begin to see the outlines of Adams's vision, the limitations of its usefulness in describing today's world, and the widespread appeal it continues to have in the face of its obsolescence.

Today, the experience of Yosemite depicted in Adams's photographs is no longer ours, nor even available to us—as anyone who has visited the park in the last ten years surely knows. Our present-day experience is

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more like that depicted in Bruce Davidson's 1965 photograph of a crowded campsite on the valley floor, all folding lawn furniture and cars among the trees. Here, the democratic nature of the photographic image finds its counterpoint in the democracy of the national park system, with none of Adams's rarefied isolation and elegance. This isn't to say that Davidson is Adams's equal as a photographer, merely that he is—like most of us—beyond the reach of the romantic imagination. What is interesting to us in retrospect are the lengths to which Adams went in his time to avoid quotidian reality both in his choice of subject matter and in his printing style, which became increasingly theatrical and hyperbolic over the course of his career.

Clearly, however, there still exists a longing for the "clean and pure and untouched" spaces that Adams's landscapes depict in such loving detail. This longing may be rooted in the trailings of the nineteenth-century notion of the sublime, which elevated landscape imagery to the status of religious icon, but it just as likely reflects an urge to escape the depredations and disillusionments of late-twentieth-century life. In the sanitized, immaculate arena of Adams's West, its frontier virginity seemingly intact, there is comfort of a kind entirely lacking in the "man-altered" or "New Topographic" landscape photography practiced today by the likes of Robert Adams, Joe Deal, Lee Friedlander, and Frank Gohlke. Adams's photographs are valued—and I mean the word in both its senses—because they function as surrogates of pristine, uncultured experience at a time when the domain of culture seems unbreachable. And inasmuch as the prints themselves are also clean and pure and un(re)touched, they now function in lieu of the scenic wilderness as artifacts of a lost contentment.

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Music

Stravinsky's *Rake,* City Opera's progress

by Samuel Lipman

In doing *The Rake's Progress* of Igor Stravinsky, the New York City Opera tried its hand at a classic of musical modernism. Despite an unsuitable set design and a less than stellar musical execution, the experiment proved worthwhile. Given the uninspiring nature of the City Opera's recent seasons, the event has been welcome news for New York opera lovers.

It was, of course, hardly a coincidence that this success for Beverly Sill's troubled company took place with a major work by one of the very few universally recognized great composers of the twentieth century after World War I. *The Rake's Progress,* written between 1948 and 1951, came at the tail end of Stravinsky's neoclassical period, and thus looked backward, both in musical inspiration (to Gluck and Mozart, among others) and in subject, time, and place (to Hogarth's frank and even shocking paintings of eighteenth-century London life).

The opera Stravinsky wrote was formally a conscious protest against those developments in opera associated with Wagner, Strauss, and even Alban Berg: that is, the continuous flow of melodic material, luxuriant harmonies and textures, and subject matter usually mythic in scope and always elephantine in treatment. To these virtues of size Stravinsky counterposed his own strengths of clarity, delicacy, and small, precisely wrought structures. The result was music written for a chamber-sized orchestra, and divided into "old-fashioned" operatic forms of recitatives (accompanied by the harpsichord!) and arias. The harmonies were typical middle-period Stravinsky: astringent, mildly dissonant, and carefully calculated to make each note—and each sung word—count, on the page and in the listener's ear.

To fill out his musical and scenic vision, Stravinsky asked no less a literary figure than W. H. Auden, the prodigy of English poetry in the 1930s, to write the libretto. For Auden and for Chester Kallman, his uninvited (by Stravinsky) collaborator, the libretto provided an opportunity to display poetic skill and historical knowledge. It was also a welcome chance to introduce an element of homosexual camp sailing under the flag of the then *à la mode* existentialist *acte gratuit.* The poetry and historical drama are important artistic accomplishments. The camp, exemplified by the replacement of Hogarth's elderly one-eyed heiress with a bearded lady from the circus, remains the chief problem in producing the work, and perhaps the chief flaw in the opera as a whole.

Since its first performance at Venice's Fenice theater in 1951, the opera has been perceived as caviar for sophisticates rather than main-course provender for traditional operagoers. The Metropolitan Opera production of the *Rake,* which followed a season later, was conducted by Fritz Reiner and staged by George Balanchine. Despite the names involved, the result was seen by Rudolf Bing, then the general manager of the

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Met, as "perhaps [his] most serious mistake . . . . [t]he opera was pretty disastrous." Though the opera has often been put on in Europe, and even in this country outside New York, it has never been repeated by the Met, and, surprisingly enough, it had never been done by the City Opera until the present season.

Major public interest in the present City Opera performance, alas, centered on the set design, created in 1975 for the Glyndebourne Festival Opera by the English painter David Hockney. Since its first use in England the design has been used in Paris, Milan, San Francisco, and Dallas. This was Hockney's first venture into opera design; more recently, he has done the decor for the Met's much-applauded *Parade* (a triple bill made up of Satie's ballet of the same name, Poulenc's *Les Mamelles de Tirésias,* and Ravel's *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*) and a less successful Stravinsky evening (another triple bill, this one made up of *The Rite of Spring, Le Rossignol,* and *Oedipus Rex*).

Hockney's *Rake* drew the usual crowd of the painter's fans, and even *The New York Times*'s usually straight-laced Donal Henahan found the "whimsical sets and costumes . . . the most striking feature of a performance that otherwise had its drab stretches." But for this viewer Hockney's sets resembled, on the whole, the chic confections of checked wallpaper and department-store *papier-mâché* props, all accented by a color scheme seemingly drawn from an intimate experience of life on the Riviera (or, less charitably, in Southern California). Indeed, the visual effect of the *Rake* on this occasion was redolent of daily life in an ice-cream parlor located in some fashionable women's store—Bergdorf Goodman, Bonwit's, Bendel's, it hardly matters which one. The whoring and gambling terrors so vividly depicted by Hogarth—they were, after all, the stimulus for Stravinsky's desire to write the *Rake*—were reduced to afflictions of the consumer society. This novel re-interpretation of Hogarth doubtless makes everything more pleasant; approached in this way, even the bearded lady, made up to look like Alfred Drake, seemed like no more than an exotic, albeit slightly *outré,* sweet. Whatever the rewards here for Hockney's fans, the effect was to make Stravinsky's music an accomplice to its own mockery. That this harmful effect on the music has its origin not just in Hockney's sets but more fundamentally in Auden and Kallman's libretto is a symptom of the composer's lifelong desire to be up-to-date; it remains a disservice to his enormous musical talent.

Despite the self-conscious archaisms of the score, despite the creaky structure produced by Stravinsky's devotion to looking new by pretending to be old, the music is distinctive, tuneful, and lyrically affecting. From Anne's opening aria ("The woods are green") to the duet in Bedlam between Anne and Tom Rakewell toward the end of the opera, Stravinsky's cup of melody overflows, suggesting once again that the weakness of so many contemporary composers does not lie in their lack of desire to write melodies but only in their genius for doing so. As diverting as Stravinsky's music is in the *Rake,* and as light as it so often is, its effect is never one of trivial joke-making, but rather of the wit made posible by true seriousness.

To realize so much beautiful music one might have wished for a more distinguished and committed musical performance. Christopher Keene's conducting was four-square and routine: he seemed content to allow the orchestra to play melodic solos in a deadpan fashion, as if in modern music there could be no lyricism. The performance of tenor Jerry Hadley as Rakewell was dramatically affecting and well enunciated; soprano Erie Mills's Anne sounded tremulous in a way that suggested vocal uncertainty rather than virginal love. Elsewhere, the singers were hardly more than adequate. Except in the Bedlam scene, the chorus was required to act like epicene buffoons; under such conditions, better singers than they would have been hard put to make a musical impression. It is not necessary to perform the *Rake* so unsympathetically. In the recording of the

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1951 Venice premiere, conducted by the composer himself and with beautifully vocalized performances from Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Robert Rounseville, Jennie Tourel, and Hugues Cuenod, the spirit of the music comes through brilliantly, despite the primitive technical quality of the discs and the shaky ensemble, which is to be expected in the first traversal of a difficult work.[1]

A mixed verdict, surely, but hardly one without hope for the future. For the point that must be kept in mind about the City Opera's *Rake's Progress* is not the imperfect production or musical performance. Far more important was that the City Opera had the wit and the taste—and even, in light of the pressures from the box office and the weight of years of accumulated middlebrow taste, the audacity—to do a work of high musical modernism. Whatever the shortcomings of Igor Stravinsky when judged *sub specie aeternitatis,* and whatever the weaknesses of Auden and Kallman when judged against their literary peers, the fact remains that their work is marked by an intrinsic interest and level of accomplishment all too rare in twentieth-century opera and music. One hates to say that their shortcomings and their contradictions mirror our own, and that the work is worth performing for that very reason; to say this is to encourage error just because of its wrongheadedness. One can do no more than require that an attempt be made at putting on the best. Sitting in the New York State Theater on a warm September night gave at least this listener the distinct impression that the New York City Opera, in making just such an attempt, had found what it really ought to be doing. It should be encouraged in this brave new departure.

1 Fonit Cetra DOC 29. Of the two commercial recordings of the work, both made by the composer, the earlier one (1953) is superior in vocalism and atmosphere to the later (1964). Unfortunately, only the later discs are currently available. For a discussion of the problem of the Stravinsky recorded *oeuvre,* see my article, "Stravinsky: Re-recording History," in *The New Criterion,* October 1982.

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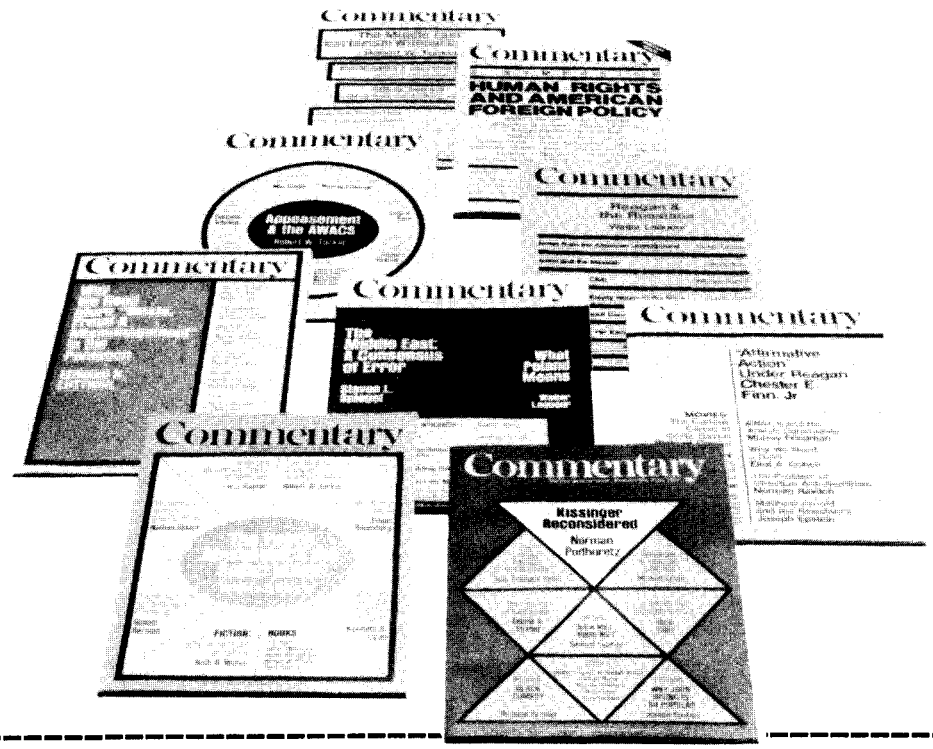

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Art

The art of George McNeil

by Eric Gibson

The normal lot of an artist is recognition early, recognition late, or no recognition at all. Late recognition often prompts a thorough re-examination of the artist's oeuvre—not just his recent work, but everything, stretching back to the very beginnings of his career. The discussion is then likely to focus on how the artist's early work illumines whatever movements he may have been a part of.

The case of George McNeil, currently the subject of a retrospective exhibition at the Artists' Choice Museum in New York,[1] is different. McNeil, now 76, is a first-generation Abstract Expressionist. He first showed at the Egan Gallery in 1950, two years after De Kooning. But he finds himself today mentioned repeatedly in discussions of Neo-Expressionist painting, and even embraced as something of a godfather by partisans of that movement. Curiously, this has happened without his having deviated significantly from the premises that have governed his art from the beginning.

To understand how exceptional McNeil's present status is, one has only to consider the place accorded to the other members of the Abstract Expressionist school by many younger artists today. De Kooning, for example, is viewed as an old master, as distant and unapproachable as Rembrandt. Indeed, the entire Abstract Expressionist movement is now regarded with some condescension, perhaps because its emphasis on the personal is at odds with the prevailing aesthetic of glib appropriation.

It is not exactly George McNeil the Abstract Expressionist whose work is being displayed in the current retrospective, however. To be sure, this broad survey offers the opportunity to examine the work of an artist who, though very much at the center of the Abstract Expressionist movement, has received only cursory attention. But the show's emphasis on recent work—out of thirty paintings, twenty date from the period after 1970—makes it clear that it is George McNeil the precursor of Neo-Expressionism we are supposed to see in this show, even if this view represents a distortion of the artist's intentions. The unanswered question that hangs in the air is: How accurate is the picture of the artist we are getting here?

In McNeil's paintings from the period 1955-1965—the first decade covered by the current show—it is Abstract Expressionism of the figurative, gestural variety that we see, a variety most often associated with the figurative paintings of De Kooning and Hans Hofmann. Early on McNeil's figuration verges precariously on the brink of total abstraction. Yet the presence of the figure is powerfully felt, even when, as in *Black*

1 "George McNeil: Expressionism, 1954-1984," organized by Richard Hall, is on view at the Artists' Choice Museum (394 West Broadway) until November 10.

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Recumbent (1954), it is reduced to a simple black totem situated in a pink and red field. From 1960 on, individual figures are constructed from heavy, broad masses of paint that collectively stress the canvas surface. This is hardly surprising, for McNeil's emphasis here is on the act of painting as expressed by the artist's specific gesture upon the canvas. He takes utmost liberties with nature in the interest of painterly expressiveness.

McNeil's execution is at once summary and precise—it is the precision of a master draftsman and sure colorist so confident of his craft that he can take it for granted. One fine example of his mastery is *Marcella* (1966). Here the figure fills the canvas, assuming a quasi-kneeling position. Her torso is composed of broad, flat bands of purple, green, orange, blue, and white. Her left arm, upraised, is orange, her hand crimson, her fingers yellow; she hollers a jaunty greeting through a mouth drawn directly with a tube of white paint. As this painting shows, drawing is primarily a function of painting in McNeil's work, with line used only fleetingly—to coax an errant contour back to the center, to bring a form into clearer definition.

McNeil's paintings are characterized by an extraordinary, uninhibited exuberance; they lack the self-consciousness or tragic worldview that if so often found in the work of his contemporaries. Moreover, his expressionism is achieved almost entirely by formal means. In the debates of the Fifties over the legitimacy of "subject" in art, McNeil belonged to the group that believed in its necessity, but in his paintings subject exists in somewhat circumscribed form. Because of the disparity between the effect of his pictures as a whole and the relative modesty of their narrative dimensions, the figure in McNeil's work seems at times little more than an excuse, the "key" in which he tunes his expressionist voice. In *Secret* (1965), for example, the effect of the vermillion-crimson-ochre ground, the mix of colors making up the figure (black, purple, blue, green, crimson), and the abrupt handling of the surface is so great that it is some time before we realize that the figure we are looking at is in fact sitting.

The burden of the expressive charge in McNeil's work during this period is carried by color and painterly gesture. The importance of color in particular reflects the influence of Hans Hofmann, with whom McNeil studied briefly in the Thirties. Fauve color and a vigorous, empirical method are essential components in Hofmann's aesthetic, and his imprint can be seen in McNeil's vivid palette and in the occasional areas of color saturation in his paintings. From Hofmann's more formal pictorial concerns, however, McNeil stands at some remove. In McNeil's hands, color is freed from descriptive function and is put to use as the agent of a visionary, expressionistic will.

Around 1970 McNeil's work begins to change in ways that make us see why it is that he is now embraced by the younger generation of Neo-Expressionist painters. This shift takes the form of an increased crudeness of drawing technique and paint handling, and a greater agitation of surface—something close to *art brut*. Also there is a heightening of figure-ground contrasts, primarily through heavier, more deliberate outlining and the division of the interior of each image into elaborately worked areas of pattern and pigment. Finally, McNeil's palette, though not greatly different from before, is made more powerful as he substitutes broad masses of color with denser activity, creating many juxtapositions in a small space. The effect of these techniques in a work such as *Yes?* (1978)—in which a primal head stares out at us, a bird perched atop it—is one of informality and direct expression.

Around this time as well, McNeil's subjects and the particular character he gives them undergo a change. His figures are given a specific narrative context, and thus the paintings they inhabit become more "literary." Gone are the open-ended, almost mystical titles so characteristic of the Abstract Expressionism of the Forties: *Medea,*

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Laurenziana, Secret. Instead we now encounter *Demonic Disco, Joey Loves Milly,* and *Professor Unrath.*

All this points to a broader change in McNeil's art, a shift from the aestheticizing realm of "the figure" toward the frenzied anarchy of daily life. *Professor Unrath* (1977), for example, shows a man at a bar staring up at a (presumably topless) dancer; this is a far cry from a work like *Secret,* with its quietly, almost academically posed figure.

In McNeil's recent paintings, subject is aligned with manner. And it is this marriage of unruly, almost *declassé* material and *art brut* handling that supposedly connects McNeil to the aggressively public, vernacular art of the Neo-Expressionists centered in and around New York's East Village. Yet the connection is entirely specious. The work of such graffiti artists as Richard Hambelton and Keith Haring is consciously "urban": it is meant to be taken in at a glance, preferably while the viewer is in motion. We pay a price for this in the repetitiousness of the images and in their scant power to nourish the imagination. By contrast, McNeil engages us on subtle emotional levels. *Joey Loves Milly* (1977), for example—in which an embracing couple turns to face the viewer, the man wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the picture's title—is a charming, deeply moving portrayal of awkward, ingenuous affection.

More important is the matter of McNeil's artistic outlook, which was formed during the ascendancy of Abstract Expressionism. For the "neo" designation to have any connection to McNeil, he would have to have set aside his emphasis on the inner life and the empirical method and taken up a quasi-illustrational method for transcribing the hoopla around him. But this is not what we find in his work. Rather, I think what has happened is the reverse: McNeil has admitted the outside world to his inner life, where it serves as a stimulus for his own visionary interpretation of it.

Those who come to the McNeil retrospective looking for either a precursor or an early convert to Neo-Expressionism—and,

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given the timing and organization of the show, they are likely to be many—will no doubt walk away thinking that this is what they have found. But they will have missed the essential George McNeil, visible throughout the exhibition despite the stylistic and iconographic shifts it displays. McNeil's art has deep formal and spiritual roots. He might appear to move away from them, even to turn his back on them, yet he never really does. For without them he could never produce these pictures: touching, witty, profound, and uniformly uncompromising in their raw, affective power.

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Theater

Reactionary Papp

by Mimi Kramer

Forgive the hero . . .
—Richard Wilbur, in "Still, Citizen Sparrow"

That *Henry V* is about the social limitations of heroism is not a point that every production of the play can easily bring to the fore. So intent is Shakespeare on dazzling us with Henry's charisma, his ability to make other characters in the play fall morally in love with him, that the audience is in danger of falling in love with Henry as well, without noticing some of the more troubling personality traits with which Shakespeare has seen fit to endow the king. For if Hal is a monarch whose way with people enables him to "command all the good lads of Eastcheap" and "drink with any tinker in his own language," who can ask a tired army to fight a brilliant battle out of good fellowship, enlist the respect and sympathies of an enemy king's herald, and woo a foreign princess without the benefit of philology, he is also capable of a more terrifying quality of action. He has the heart to do things that most of us would balk at, things we may find hard to forgive.

"I know thee not, old man: fall to thy prayers," he says to Falstaff, and so Falstaff dies of a broken heart. "We would have all such offenders so cut off," the king remarks when told that his old friend Bardolph is to be executed for raiding a church in enemy territory, and so Bardolph dies. What Henry has is the ability to subjugate private passion to public necessity to the point where there is scarcely a feeling that he cannot channel into a public display of emotion for political purposes. It makes him one hell of a good statesman; it does not, however, make him a very likable person—not in the abstract, anyway. But then the relationship between affability and good government is one of the things Shakespeare sets out to explore in his history plays. Richard II channels his passions into gorgeous poetry and Richard III endears himself to us by having no human passions at all: neither of them is a particularly good king. In *Henry V* Shakespeare seems to be suggesting, like the speaker in the Richard Wilbur poem, that what really defines the hero is an ability to do things that most of us could not bear to do, things which, though necessary, are hateful but by no means wrong.

Most productions tend to make either too little or too much of Henry's moral ruthlessness, and one that elicits just the proper balance of our fear and admiration for the hero of the play is rare. I saw a production of *Henry V* this summer, however, that just about blew me away. It wasn't the one in Central Park, although Wilford Leach's version of *Henry V* at the Delacorte Theater this summer certainly had its moments. Free Shakespeare in the Park tends to be a bit patchy and this production was less patchy than most. Particularly memorable was the performance of a wonderfully talented actor named Anthony Heald. Playing Fluellen, the

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king's Welsh captain, Heald's accent was a bit erratic: strictly speaking, it wasn't always Welsh, but by and large it was quite definitely Celtic.

Oddly, Anthony Heald was the only actor who seemed to be at all aware of what was happening onstage. Whatever the rest of the cast was thinking of, it wasn't the tide of battle in the glorious war with the French. It wasn't the king's discovery of the conspiracy led by his most trusted friends and ministers, the tragic death in battle of his gallant young kinsman the Duke of York, or the fate of a scurvy trio of mercenaries named Pistol, Bardolph, and Nym, who don't manage to fare very well out of the Battle of Agincourt on the whole. But Anthony Heald spent a good deal of his time on stage reacting—and Fluellen is a character whose reactions to things very much help to shape the audience's feelings about what is happening in the play.

More impressive still was the accuracy with which Heald managed to catch the rhythm and spirit of Shakespearean comedy—notoriously one of the hardest things for undertrained American actors to do. Fluellen is, of course, essentially a comic character and Heald's lively and intelligent performance endowed with equal portions of absurdity and valor the figure of the Welsh captain who has such a fiery disposition even off the field, who sets so great a store by knowing (what he calls) "the disciplines of war," who tends to run on at the mouth so, and who takes such a ridiculous pleasure in his sovereign's having been born west of the river Wye.

The high point of the evening was the scene in Act IV in which Fluellen and Gower (the English captain) discuss in glowing terms the king's incomparable virtues, and in which Fluellen lays before his colleague what he takes to be proof incontrovertible of Henry's greatness. Beginning with the observation that Henry was born in Wales (from which it logically follows that he must be great), Fluellen goes on to draw an analogy between Harry of Monmouth and Alexander the Great:

> I think it is in Macedon where Alexander is porn. I tell you, captain, if you look in the maps of the 'orld, I warrant you sall find, in the comparisons between Macedon and Monmouth, that the situations, look you, is both alike. There is a river in Macedon, and there is also moreover a river at Monmouth: it is called Wye at Monmouth; but it is out of my prains what is the name of the other river; but 'tis all one, 'tis alike as my fingers is to my fingers, and there is salmons in both.

Fluellen's logic at this juncture is no better than his syntax or his geography. Not content to leave the unenlightening analogy alone, moreover, he carries on with it and in a direction which gets him into trouble.

> If you mark Alexander's life well, Harry of Monmouth's life is come after it indifferent well; for there is figures in all things. Alexander—God knows, and you know—in his rages, and his furies, and his wraths, and his cholers, and his moods, and his displeasures, and his indignations, and also being a little intoxicates in his prains, did, in his ales and his angers, look you, kill his best friend, Cleitus.

This description of the Greek emperor, of course, bears no resemblance at all to the Christian king we have by this time, at the end of the battle, come to know. And Gower is quick to point this out: Henry, he objects, "never killed any of his friends." To the audience, however, it is obvious which way Fluellen's muddled thoughts are turning: toward Falstaff, whose death was vividly recounted at the beginning of the play by Mistress Quickly. Since Falstaff's death is representative of one of the aspects of Henry's character we find difficult to understand and come to terms with, Fluellen's troublesome analogy leaves a half-spoken accusation hanging in the air, despite the loquacious Welshman's best efforts to extricate himself from this logical disaster.

> I speak but in the figures and comparisons of it: as Alexander killed his friend Cleitus, being in his ales and his cups, so also Harry Mon-

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> mouth, being in his right wits and his good judgments, turned away the fat knight with the great-belly doublet: he was full of jests and gipes, and knaveries, and mocks; I have forgot his name.

Anthony Heald's manner, in this scene, was the essence of concerned confusion and the scene came off as a masterpiece of high comedy without detracting from its more serious content.

So full marks go to Anthony Heald. That the rest of the New York Shakespeare Festival's production of *Henry V* was pretty unremarkable stuff is colder news, but yet they must be told. Like last summer's production of *Richard III,* this *Henry V* was, in the long run, competent. Kevin Kline's Henry, like his Richard of the year before, seemed an honest attempt to replicate Olivier's performance in his film version of the play. Wilford Leach's direction, if not inspired, was faithful to the general spirit of the piece. George Martin as the Chorus was dull but efficacious. The clowns—Nym, Bardolph, Pistol, and Mistress Quickly—were execrable. Sounding like Australians who had lived too long in Memphis, they charged through their lines and comic routines with a ferocious purposefulness that made questions of character and plot entirely academic. But Jeffrey Jones and Vivienne Argent, as the Dauphin and Alice, were superb. Best, perhaps, was the choreography of the battle sequences, in which trumpets blared and smoke from cannons filled the stage. At one point a pair of platforms parted, opening up a sort of breach for the English soldiers to rush into. While this was perhaps not precisely what the poet had in mind, it was certainly picturesque and stirring.

What the production chiefly lacked, apart from a great performance from Kevin Kline, was a clear and specific reading of the play theatrically expressed. Both of these failings, moreover, seemed to be a function of the same thing: the director's failure to see Henry as the exemplar of a particular philosophy of kingship and, in turn, to make Kline see it. One had the sense that so accomplished an actor might, with a better director, have been led to a more subtle interpretation of the role. As it was, however, it seemed as though no one—neither actor nor director—had actually stopped to work out what this play was all about. The result was a slightly ragged attempt at "traditionalist" Shakespeare which, because it was free and because we were all sitting in Central Park on a fine summer night, was great good fun, but which would have been, under any other circumstances, embarrassingly reactionary.

The word "reactionary" may seem an odd one to use of Joseph Papp's approach to Shakespeare. The fact is, though, that the New York Shakespeare Festival (which lags behind state-of-the-art Shakespeare production by several theatrical generations in any case) seems to have entered into a stolidly traditionalist period which may be a reaction away from all that mucking about in blue jeans and rock musicals they were doing in the Sixties and Seventies. Of the Public Theater's last three Shakespeare productions, all of them, in style and visual design, have seemed more than a little old-fashioned. The so-called "female *Hamlet*" in the winter of 1982-83, apart from its central gimmick, was actually a highly traditional re-creation of the play, as was the 1983 production of *Richard III* in Central Park, whose only unusual feature was the slightly anti-Tudor slant which the British director, Jane Howell, chose to give the play.

What this tendency offers us is a chance to see what the New York Shakespeare Festival—stripped of its Sixties trappings—really amounts to, a chance to see how far, as an institution devoted to staging modern productions of Shakespeare, its theatrical vision really extends. Unfortunately, that is not very far. At best, the Public Theater seems capable of getting the play on stage in some recognizable and moderately entertaining form. But when it comes to proffering a vision of why Henry V should or should not be considered a paradigm of perfect kingship, or of what it is that makes dangerous people like Richard III so attractive and so sympathetic, or of what loss to the world is

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entailed by Hamlet's failure to combat evil with Renaissance humanism, the New York Shakespeare Festival is entirely at a loss.

I think the Festival's worst enemy in this regard—what keeps it from being a better institution than it is—may be its fundamentally untheatrical view of what it means to interpret a play. For Joseph Papp—as, indeed, for most of the directors to whom he delegates responsibility—interpreting the play means *re*-interpreting it, and that means offering an alternative reading of the text to the one traditionally taught in school. You either do that, or you do nothing at all. So you end up casting Diane Venora in the male-lead role, or Kevin Kline, or you make a fool out of the Earl of Richmond. Whatever else this interest in *textual* innovation does, it leaves aside the whole question of what modern staging techniques and modern approaches to costume, set, and lighting design can do to change or add to the way in which an audience has always viewed a play.

This exclusive "attention" to the text, to dealing only with the verbiage in Shakespeare, gives rise in turn to a relentlessly literal and realistic approach to theater design which takes into account almost nothing that has happened in the history of the stage since the heyday of the Old Vic in the years just after the War. A lot has happened to modern staging techniques in the last twenty-five years—partly as a result of the increasing influence of Brechtian theater in England—to change the way that Shakespeare can be rendered for a modern audience: costumes, sets, and lighting are designed so as to cut across the artificial barriers that realism creates between actor and audience and so as to *suggest* the evocation of a time or place or atmosphere rather than re-create one. All this seems to have passed the New York Shakespeare Festival right by, so that far from being a positive and constructive force in developing modern techniques for staging Shakespeare, the NYSF seems not even to have kept up with the times. Year after year the Public Theater tries to keep Shakespeare fresh and new by changing the meanings of the words rather

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than by finding new and innovative ways for turning a sound reading of the play into spectacle. That is what makes a production like this year's *Henry V* seem like a throwback to another era and makes Public Theater Shakespeare seem like so much costume drama. Given the state of the art, all that blood and smoke and shot, all those fellows rushing around in bloomers with trumpets and banners, is positively medieval!

I saw a Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Henry V* at Stratford-Upon-Avon this summer in which the costumes seemed to give the lie to time. Taking advantage of current fashion, the designer has fitted out the English army in loose, baggy trousers, flappy suede tunics, and wrinkly, low-heeled, calf-length boots that could not possibly have been construed as "modern dress," exactly, but that would not have looked at all out of place draped over a Space Invaders machine in the local pub. I saw a production of *Richard III* (also at Stratford) in which two unobtrusive hooks transformed two outsized banners into the suggestion of pitched tents on a battlefield. I saw a production of *Twelfth Night* at the RSC's Barbican Theater in London in which an entire storm at sea was suggested at the beginning of the play by a particular sequence of light cast for thirty seconds on a cyclorama.

Illyria looked like no place anyone has ever seen—but if you peered at the set long enough, you realized that it was not meant to. Dominated by an enormous box-tree of broad and intricate aspirations, the set gave way at the back to a series of rocks with steps cut into them, behind which we saw sometimes sea and sometiems sky, depending on the light. A tall iron gate on one side of the stage kept company with two crumbling pillars that seemed to belong to no related structure, and the front of a small woodland cottage on the other side of the stage looked out on a forest floor strewn with decaying leaves. More than anything else this tableau of unrelated landmarks looked like a hodgepodge of elements from every romantic

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stage set one had ever seen: not a single or specific place, but half a dozen different places all at once, an evocation made up of images of elsewhere. The moon seemed to rise between each scene; but rather than marking time, the clear night skies that fell between the distant rocks had the effect of carving out an area of timelessness. When Feste curled up in the shelter of the great tree at the close of his final song and, with the rain and the dark coming on, we heard the first and last verses come back at him, like an echo, from a chorus of voices offstage, it was as though we had seen a whole life go by before us in a time and place that never were and never could have been.

Productions like this *Twelfth Night* are as rare in London as they are in New York. At the RSC they are not so rare however. Which isn't to say, of course, that the RSC never slips up. But with four theaters to run (two in London and two in Stratford) and a season in which sometimes as many as ten or fifteen productions of Shakespeare still represent only about half the company's output in a given year, there is bound to be the odd "whacky" production—the Barnum & Bailey *Comedy of Errors* that sets the London critics' teeth on edge, or the *All's Well* that proves to be too bleak for Broadway.

If the RSC worked magic in *Twelfth Night* with a little light and music, a little cardboard and cloth, what they did with a little light and music in *Henry V* is something I shall never forget. Use of the Chorus, in the Central Park production, had been characteristically uninventive: George Martin appeared, addressed the audience alone on stage, apologized for the technical limitations of the theatrical medium, and implored the audience to piece out the company's imperfections with their thoughts. Then he went away again until it was time for his next speech. In Stratford the Chorus never left the stage. He stood about watching the action and sometimes making stage-managerial gestures to introduce a character or usher in a new scene. When we were in the English camp he wore a greatcoat as though to suggest that the English army could stand to be more warmly dressed. And once, when the French camp descended from above on a ceremonial dais bathed in golden light, the ragged English army joined the Chorus, watching them from the darkness of the apron.

It was, if you like, a way of literalizing the Chorus's function as a medium between the audience and the play—entirely extrapolated from the text. The most interesting aspect of the Stratford production, however, was the way in which it dealt with the problem of the unappealing hero. Adrian Noble's Henry was not unappealing at all: in fact, he was one of the most appealing Henry's I have seen. But Noble had hit upon a conceit which, while it endeared the king to us, also set in motion a complex system of implied accusation which other elements in the production went on to carry out. Quite simply, the twenty-three-year-old actor who played Henry played him as a schoolboy. Kenneth Brannagh's age, though, was the least of it. His every movement and intonation, his whole manner whether in war or wooing, transformed the king into a character straight out of *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* or *Tom Brown's Schooldays,* so that Henry seemed to represent a recognizable system of values—those of the English public-schoolboy, a figure whom the British public holds particularly dear. That Henry V can be played as an English public-schoolboy suggests that heroic values have not changed all that much in England in the last four hundred years. For Prince Hal is very much that darling of British culture: the boy who, having wasted his time at university sitting around in the pub, still manages to pull off a First in his final year.

Everyone loves a schoolboy, and the audience at Stratford went wild when Kenneth Brannagh, on having his use of the definite article in French corrected by the Princess, interpolated crossly, "Whatever!" We loved it when, on hearing that Kate took a dim view of girls who allow themselves to be kissed prior to marriage, the king winced and bowed his knees in disappointment at his sweetheart's bourgeois nicety: "Oh,

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Kate!" he wailed, his voice breaking. How we all laughed!

But playing Henry V as the honorable schoolboy had another effect as well as that of making the king irresistible. It created a natural foil for Henry: for there is another youth of good character whose fortunes we become briefly involved with in *Henry V*: the unnamed Boy from the Boar's Head Tavern who accompanies Pistol and Bardolph and Nym to France and ends up wishing he had never come.

> Would I were in an ale-house in London. I would give all my fame for a pot of ale and safety.

A cheeky little beggar, the Boy from the Boar's Head Tavern hangs around with Falstaff and his mates in very much the way that Prince Hal used to do. Like Henry, moreover, the Boy can take them or leave them. Although he follows Pistol, Nym, and Bardolph to France, once there he finds that they are not such fitting company and he shares his views with the audience on more than one occasion. Like Henry, the Boy finds something morally repugnant and implicitly dangerous in their way of life and decides to seek employment and companionship elsewhere. Unlike the king, however, the Boy does not survive the play. The Boy in *Henry V* is Shakespeare's gift to the modern director, one of those rare opportunities for extrapolating from the text which a director can take advantage of. Because nothing about him is certain but everything is implied, stage business can assert that he is Falstaff's page from *Henry IV, Part Two,* or his son, or Mistress Quickly's, or that he is just a nameless waif who has always been around. Who he is or where he comes from are never made explicit; we know what happens to him, but that only by implication. Quite a fuss gets made, late in the play, about the French army's attack on the English army's luggage train: the boys guarding the van are all massacred. Still, a modern audience may need to be reminded that when last we saw the Boy from the

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Boar's Head Tavern he was heading off in the direction of the luggage.

The Central Park production tried to make the most of this: Wilford Leach killed off the Boy onstage, in full view of the audience. Adrian Noble's production at Stratford went further: it killed off all of childhood.

There was a song first sung by the Boy himself and then picked up by remnants of the English army: someone had stitched together Pistol's "plain-song" with a snatch of the Boy's dialogue and set them to a tuneless, timeless melody, half dirge, half ditty:

> With sword and shield in bloody field
> God's vassals droop and die:
> Would I were in an ale-house in London!
> If wishes would prevail with me,
> My purpose should not fail with me
> But thither would I hie.

Heard variously at different points in the play, now at the beginning of a scene, now at the end, the song had become an evocation of regret, a suggestion to the audience that somewhere in the world of the play (probably quite close by) was someone who wished that things were other than they were or that he could have been where he was not. As the Boy in the Stratford production turned away from the audience and headed for the dark recesses of the Royal Shakespeare Theater's deep open stage, a harp offstage began to pick out this melody. And as four hooded figures approached him from either side and held him in a menacing pose in freeze-frame, as the Chorus drew a simple white curtain across the stage, shutting out the scene, the Boy's lament hung wordlessly in the air: "Would I were in an ale-house in London."

The news that the French have attacked the luggage van comes two scenes later at the beginning of the interview between Gower and Fluellen, the scene whose comic heights in Central Park this summer I described earlier. What the Stratford production did was to set it in a tragic milieu: actually at the scene of the massacre. When the Chorus drew aside the white curtain two scenes after drawing it across the stage, I thought perhaps that Adrian Noble had taken leave of his senses. Clearly one of us had! How were they going to do the funny bits in the midst of this carnage? Answer: there weren't any funny bits. Kneeling beside the body of one child and holding another in his arms was Fluellen, talking of Alexander. Because he spoke very slowly and because what he was talking about had nothing to do with where he was and what we were seeing, because the speech is rambling and illogical as written, the whole effect was to make it seem as though Fluellen's mind was wandering, as though his wits had turned in response to what he saw. At each juncture in the speech his words took on new meanings. "'Tis as alike as my fingers is to my fingers," he said, raising the child's fingers to his lips. And when he drew out the long, single syllable of the river in Wales—"Wye-e-e"—it sounded like a question. The whole analogy itself became an attempt to make a kind of sense out of a universe he suddenly could not understand, and the reference to Falstaff took on an added resonance because of the aural and visual links that had been made between this scene and the death of the Boar's Head Tavern Boy.

At the end of the scene the Chorus drew the white curtain across the stage once more, and this time it stayed drawn. But through the scrim we saw a figure going about the corpses in the field, lighting candles. Throughout the rest of the play the candles behind the scrim remained alight and visible to the audience, like an altar of the dead, so that the triumphal scenes in which peace is declared, in which Henry woos the French princess and in which the two kingdoms are united, took place against the backdrop of the candlepoints behind the scrim, stretching back, like harbor lights, to what had gone before.

Not everything in this production was exactly as I would have had it. I disliked Ian McDiarmid's Chorus, which I found arch

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and inappropriately ironic and the direction of the scene at Southampton in which the conspiracy is unmasked was absurd. But more than any other production of the play I've seen (and that includes the Alan Howard *Henry V* at Stratford in 1975) this one expressed the audience's tragic predicament in contemplating "the mirror of all Christian kings." I started blubbering during the scene between Gower and Fluellen and, with an entire act to go, was still a sodden, gibbering mess when my friend steered me out into the sunshine.

We were there in a professional capacity and I thought he must have felt a bit embarrassed, having to talk to press agents with this hysterical woman in tow. Still, he was very nice about it. With an hour or two to kill before *Richard III,* we walked around the pretty tourist town of Stratford with me burbling all the way. It was only when I found myself being led to the little country church that I pulled myself together enough to assure my friend that I was not in need of spiritual comfort. *Richard III* was entirely lost on me, though.

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Books

John Hawkes's fan club

by Bruce Bawer

Humors of Blood and Skin: A John Hawkes Reader[1]—the author's thirteenth straight book from New Directions—contains just about what you'd expect: four short stories, excerpts from all nine novels, a fragment of a novel-in-progress, brief autobiographical prefaces to each of the selections. A fair enough overview. But the book's primary purpose, one senses, is not so much to provide the reading public with snippets from twenty-year-old novels as it is simply to *exist,* and by existing to get us all a little bit more used to the idea that John Hawkes is an important writer, a modern classic, an Author for the Ages. Indeed, William Gass's introduction stops just short of proclaiming Hawkes's divinity—and the man even signs himself "William H. Gass, Washington University, St. Louis," as if this were a scholarly document of sorts, which in a way it is; for though Hawkes has achieved literary eminence in the great world beyond the campus gates, the hotbed of Hawkesianism is, was, and ever shall be the English department.

In fact, the Hawkes phenomenon was *born* in the English department—in English J, to be specific, a creative writing course taught by Professor Albert J. Guerard at Harvard in the autumn of 1947. Hawkes, an undergraduate, was a student in English J who had somehow discovered—quite on his own, apparently—that plot, character, setting, and theme got in the way of "totality of vision" and were therefore "the true enemies of the novel." Guerard was so impressed by the stories that young Mr. Hawkes had written under the influence of this hypothesis that he took the precocious theorist and his work straight to the offices of New Directions, whose president, James Laughlin, was a Harvard alumnus and Guerard's friend. Laughlin was impressed too, so impressed that by the time Hawkes had his A.B. in hand, Laughlin had not only published Hawkes's novella, "Charivari," in *New Directions 11,* but had issued his first novel, *The Cannibal,* with an introduction by Professor Guerard.

And what an introduction it was! Singlehandedly, it set the schizophrenic tone—half scholar's, half booster's—that one academic after another, upon climbing onto the Hawkes bandwagon, has since taken as his own. Without bothering to identify himself as Hawkes's teacher, mentor, and sponsor, Guerard lets fly the accolades; he situates Hawkes on a level with Kafka, Faulkner, and Djuna Barnes (doing so "advisedly," he claims, in a wonderful imitation of scholarly circumspection, because "I think the talent, intention, present accomplishment and ultimate promise of John Hawkes are suggested by some conjunction of these three disparate names"), and with a number of other imposing figures. Yet the terms in which Guerard executes this comparison are peculiar

1 *Humors of Blood and Skin: A John Hawkes Reader*; New Directions, 320 pages, $22.50.

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indeed. To him, the magnificence of his protégé's talent is demonstrated by the fact that Hawkes "is now, at the outset of his career and at the age of twenty-three, a rather more 'difficult' writer than Kafka or Faulkner, and fully as difficult a writer as Djuna Barnes"; that "as a picture of the real rather than the actual Germany, and of the American occupant of that Germany, *The Cannibal* is as frankly distorted as Kafka's picture of the United States in *Amerika*"; that *The Cannibal* is characterized "by a very distinct reluctance (the reluctance of a Conrad or a Faulkner) to tell a story directly"; that, in *The Cannibal,* a degree of "difficulty and distraction is provided, as in Djuna Barnes, by the energy, tension, and brilliance of phrasing often expended on the relatively unimportant"; that *The Cannibal*'s "total reading of life and vision of desolation [are] as terrible as that of Melville's *Encantadas*"; that "as Kafka achieved a truth about his society through perhaps unintentional claustrophobic images and impressions, so Hawkes . . . has achieved some truth about his." In short: *The Cannibal* is as difficult, as distorted, and as depressing as the work of many great writers. Therefore *The Cannibal* is a great book and Hawkes is a great writer.

If such characteristics automatically made a book great, then *The Cannibal* would be a work of the utmost distinction. The novel is nominally set in an imaginary German town, Spitzen-on-the-Dein, in 1914 and 1945, but things are so surrealistically confusing that the novel cannot really be said to have anything so pedestrian as a setting. Similarly, Hawkes gives us several names, but nothing resembling a human being ever takes form around any of them, so he's safe there, too: no real characters here. He's not out to evoke a particular place, time, or person but "to render [as he confides in *Humors of Blood and Skin*] my own vision of total destruction, total nightmare." Perhaps the best way to understand what Hawkes means by "vision" is to describe *The Cannibal,* or at least its first few pages, in some detail.

The book begins with the release of inmates from a mental institution near Hawkes's mythical town. One of the inmates, a pseudo-character named Balamir, makes his way into the town, and Hawkes provides an inventory of the things he passes along the way: the "fallen electric poles," the "piles of debris," the "same tatters of wash hung for weeks in the same cold air." By the end of the first page, we've gotten the point: this place (though we can hardly recognize it as a place) has suffered total destruction. But Hawkes is just getting started. He doesn't want merely to establish that everything in sight is broken to bits, falling apart, or rotting away, and then move on to something else. Heavens, no. He wants to create a *vision.* And since this is not Vladimir Nabokov or Nathanael West (or, for that matter, Edmund White, James Purdy, or Truman Capote), what that means is that we get more of the same—and more, and more, and more:

> Piles of fallen bricks and mortar were pushed into the gutters like mounds of snow, smashed walls disappeared into the darkness, and stretching along the empty streets were rows of empty vendors' carts . . . . Bookstores and chemist's shops were smashed and pages from open books beat back and forth in the wind, while from split sides of decorated paper boxes a soft cheap powder was blown along the streets like fine snow. Papier-mâché candies were trampled underfoot . . . .

Evocative, yes. But it's also quite enough. Not for Hawkes. He drops Balamir for the moment, tosses a few more disembodied names at us—Madame Snow, her daughter Jutta, the Mayor, the Signalman, the Census Taker—only to return, immediately after introducing each of them, to his catalogue of the smashed, the moldy, the trampled, the fallen. Hawkes informs us that the legs and head were lopped off the town's statue of a horse, that the "rattling trains" were halted by "the curling rails," that "the empty shops and larders" were filled "with a pungent smell of mold," that the only horse left in town was "one gray beast" who "trampled, unshod, in the bare garden, growing thinner each day, and more wild," that "banners

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were in the mud, no scrolls of figured words flowed from the linotype, and the voice of the town at night sounded weakly only from Herr Stintz's tuba," that "there was nothing to eat . . . and tables were piled on one another, chipped with bullet-holes," that the town was full of "piles of cold rubbish and earth." *Et cetera, ad infinitum.*

This is what Hawkes means by vision. This crumbling town is supposed to rise up and haunt one, the way Stonehenge does at the end of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles.* But it doesn't work. Why? One reason, at least, is that there are people in *Tess,* people we believe in and care about, who give those weathered stones symbolic meaning, who make them matter. The same holds for James's golden bowl, for Woolf's lighthouse, for Fitzgerald's green light at the end of *Gatsby.* Reading *The Cannibal,* one wants desperately to be moved, but one isn't; in spite of Hawkes's prepossessing litany of broken buildings and smashed statues, the lack of human dimension makes the whole thing surprisingly inert.

Nonetheless, *The Cannibal* achieved what it was meant to. It was no bestseller, but, largely thanks to the attention Guerard attracted with his prefatory puffery, it was a *succès d'estime.* And Hawkes's subsequent novels—eight of them published between 1951 and 1982—solidified his position as a leading visionary novelist. Of course, none of this *succès* came about without help. As Hawkes's body of work took shape, so did an equally noteworthy body: the John Hawkes "fan club," a well-defined group of academic critics who have gathered around Hawkes and his works in the manner of a corps of disciples, and who have been instrumental in the rise of Hawkes's fortunes. Among them are Leslie A. Fiedler; Robert A. Scholes (Hawkes's colleague at Brown University), who included a chapter on Hawkes in his influential 1967 study *The Fabulators*; Donald J. Greiner, Frederick Busch, and John Kuehl, authors of critical studies of Hawkes's work published in the mid-Seventies; John Graham, editor of a collection of essays on Hawkes's novel *Second Skin*; and of course, Guerard, who has published a number of articles on Hawkes. The fan club convenes irregularly, at university symposia and MLA conventions, to discuss Hawkes's work. Its chief document is an outré volume entitled *A John Hawkes Symposium: Design and Debris* (1977), which contains the proceedings of a conference at Muhlenberg College whose speakers included not only most of the gentlemen listed above, but—just to establish beyond a doubt that the real purpose of this conclave was not criticism but celebration—Hawkes himself. To keep things entirely in the family, *A John Hawkes Symposium* was published by (ahem) James Laughlin.

The locust-like descent of scholars upon a contemporary novelist is, of course, hardly remarkable; many a writer has had the dubious honor of being paraphrased to death in dissertations and misinterpreted from the lecterns of hotel conference rooms. But few, if any, have seemed to pay so much attention to their academic expositors, or have owed them so much, as has John Hawkes. And few have been the subject of such unqualified veneration. For as far as the club members are concerned, Hawkes is *the* litmus test for the modern critic. "It's interesting, you know," Guerard says in his keynote address at the Muhlenberg gala, "that some of the alleged 'modernists' [during Hawkes's Harvard days] really didn't like Jack's work . . . ." The operative word is *alleged*: these self-styled modernists, simply by failing to admire the work of their colleague's undergraduate protégé, proved themselves to be Victorian fuddy-duddies. "The fact is," Guerard complains elsewhere, "that older and professional readers, with a few honorable exceptions, did not like Hawkes's work at all. They incorrigibly looked to those elements of fiction Hawkes saw as his 'enemies' at the beginning of his career." Well, you know these dishonorable, incorrigible critical types: they just go around *looking* for trouble.

Not like the members of the Hawkes fan club. The Hawkesians, at least on the subject

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of Hawkes, agree on just about everything. It is hard to read through their criticism without inferring that they have all subscribed to some party platform. They all, for example, enjoy complaining that Hawkes is ignored outside the academy. "There has been marked discrepancy," writes Kuehl, "between the academic and the general reception of John Hawkes's novels. Eminent literary critics such as Albert J. Guerard, Leslie A. Fiedler, Robert A. Scholes, and Tony Tanner have praised his art, yet Hawkes commands only a small following, many of whom are college teachers and students." Greiner echoes this sentiment, referring continually to Hawkes's "obscure reputation," his "lack of readers," his being "unknown and unread." He calls this obscurity "deplorable" and "a cause for concern." "I do hope that what I have to say will encourage more serious readers to pick up his novels," declares Greiner. "A writer of Hawkes's genius deserves a wider hearing."

One would hardly know that these men are carrying on about someone who, as a result of the efforts of their cabal, has long since escaped obscurity—who has been front-paged in *The New York Times Book Review* and the other major literary periodicals for over two decades; whose books clog the shelves of literary bookstores; who has been sanctified by the Ford, Rockefeller, and Guggenheim gods; and who is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. To be sure, this Hawkes-is-neglected routine started decades ago, when it was somewhat less of an untruth. Fiedler, for example, wrote in his introduction to *The Lime Twig* (1961) that Hawkes was "perhaps . . . the least read novelist of substantial merit in the United States," and described an ad in which Laughlin denounced the editors of *Partisan Review* for not printing "the work of such writers as Edward Dahlberg, Kenneth Patchen, Henry Miller, John Hawkes, and Kenneth Rexroth." Fiedler noted: "God knows that of all that list only John Hawkes really needs the help of the *Partisan Review*." Well, in the past two decades—thanks to the puffery of partisans like Fiedler—Hawkes has

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eclipsed all those writers, except Miller, in celebrity. But the Hawkes-is-neglected theme plays on. A typical complaint of a Hawkes clubman today is not that Hawkes can't get into the *Partisan* but that he does not have the readership of his fellow "black humorist," Joseph Heller—whose books are, of course, huge bestsellers. How famous, one wonders, can you become and still be considered obscure?

The clubmen also like to delude themselves (and mislead everybody else) with the notion that if Hawkes is less well known than he should be, it's because only academics have what it takes to appreciate him. Kuehl puts it this way: "Popular reviewers and their audiences [i.e., everybody off-campus], failing to comprehend how his work operates, also fail to understand what it expresses." This is merely a variation on the familiar academic conceit that everyone outside of academia is (to be kind about it) out of touch. It pleases the club to spread this sort of self-flattering fertilizer, and to feel that the novels of Hawkes are an all-in-the-family thing—of-the-academy, by-the-academy, for-the-academy. This possessiveness surfaces almost embarrassingly in Fiedler's introduction to *The Lime Twig*:

> Who . . . reads John Hawkes? Only a few of us, I fear, tempted to pride by our fewness, and ready in that pride to believe that the recalcitrant rest of the world doesn't deserve Hawkes, that we would do well to keep his pleasures our little secret. To tout him too widely would be the equivalent of an article in *Holiday,* a note in the travel section of the *Sunday Times,* might turn a private delight into an attraction for everybody. Hordes of the idly curious might descend on him and us, gaping, pointing—and bringing with them the Coca-Cola sign, the hot-dog stand. They've got Ischia now and Mallorca and Walden Pond. Let them leave us Hawkes!

So why is this Ischia among novelists appreciated only in the academy? Because he's *difficult,* of course. Guerard's characterization of Hawkes as "a rather more 'difficult' writer than Kafka or Faulkner" is echoed by Kuehl ("his manipulation of complicated techniques and attitudes makes him one of the most difficult American novelists since Faulkner") and by Greiner ("Hawkes is as important a writer as Updike and Nabokov. As difficult as they sometimes are, he is difficult constantly").

Hawkes is great because he's difficult. And he's difficult because of that unconventional vision. Writes Kuehl: "Those who expect formal and conceptual materials associated with traditional realism are perplexed, for Hawkes mocks these as anachronistic. Substituting 'vision' for 'novel' and 'reality' for 'realism,' he would support Robbe-Grillet's contention that verisimilitude is no longer the issue. Old familiar fictional elements . . . seem banal to an anti-realist who rightly considers himself unique." This is the key to the fan club's defense of Hawkes. Whatever shortcomings non-club critics may fault him with, the club's answer is simple: Hawkes doesn't write by the old rules, so you can't judge him by old rules. Characters that never come to life? Instead of characters, Hawkes gives us *voices.* Greiner declares of two characters in *The Beetle Leg* that neither "is meant to be fully developed. It is their voices that count." No plot? Instead of plot he gives us *vision.* "The difference," explains Greiner, "is between the conventional novel with its structure based on meaning and the experimental fiction with its coherence based on imaginative vision." "There is no room for characters," asserts Frederick Karl about *The Beetle Leg,* "as there is no room for narrative or plot. The ten episodes . . . are connected only by landscape and language. Just as the former is a state of mind more than a place, so the latter exists more in Hawkes's imagination than in the ordinary resources of language." What, one must wonder, makes voices without characters better than characters without voices? Why is an "experimental fiction" based on "vision" without "meaning" preferable to a conventional novel that has both?

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The fan club divides Hawkes's oeuvre—and quite rightly, too—into two distinct visionary epochs. Some of the boys call the first one the "waste land" period. Besides *The Cannibal,* it includes three novels: *The Beetle Leg* (1951), *The Lime Twig* (1961), and *Second Skin* (1963). The books read almost like rewrites of one another: the "visions" are virtually identical; only the pseudo-characters and pseudo-settings are different. *The Beetle Leg* has, in place of a German village and asylum, a town and dam in the American West. A man named Mulge Lampson is buried in the dam; ten years after his death, we peek in on the surrealistic lives of his shadowy survivors. Hawkes tries to build the dam up into a major symbol, but, as with *The Cannibal,* the lack of human dimension defeats him. *The Lime Twig,* though pretty much a rerun, is a step in the right direction. In a gray, grim pseudo-London, a fat, pathetic, lonely pseudo-man named Hencher and his landlord Michael Banks join in a scheme to kidnap a racehorse named Rock Castle. Early in the novel, Hencher gets kicked to death by the horse, and later on Banks and his wife Margaret meet equally unpleasant ends; one cannot help but feel that Hawkes kills off Hencher so early because he perceives that Hencher is turning into (horrors!) a real human being for whom the reader might actually develop (God help us!) sympathy.

The last "waste land" novel is *Second Skin.* The narrator is Skipper, whose present is the Edenic bliss of a tropic island, and whose past is a parade of suicides—his father's, his wife's, his daughter's—and the murder of his son-in-law Fernandez. There are some genuinely affecting passages in *Second Skin,* and they are affecting because Skipper is at least the beginning of a real character, and the settings and situations through which he moves are the beginnings of real settings and situations. Indeed, the movement throughout these four "waste land" novels is quite distinctly away from the ineffectual "visionary" method of *The Cannibal* and toward a more nearly effective, and conventional, approach. Thus, though none of these four early novels works as a whole, the last two, at least, hold promise.

In the novels that follow *Second Skin,* unfortunately, Hawkes goes off in a new direction, chasing a new "vision." This might be called his pornographic period, for if these books were more disciplined in style and structure, they would make fine additions to any adult bookstore. Guerard called the first three Hawkes's "trilogy of sex," but with *The Passion Artist* (1979) the trilogy became a tetralogy, and then in 1982 a fifth came along in the form of *Virginie: Her Two Lives,* and it was suddenly embarrassingly clear that this wasn't a nice, naughtily adventurous little cluster of Updikean or Rothean sex novels but a whole new career founded on prurience. Gone is the desperate attempt to avoid characters, settings, plots; not that Hawkes suddenly develops a great talent for these things—he simply doesn't struggle against them. Since the "vision" of these later books is almost exclusively carnal—focusing, for the most part, on very clearly defined types of sexual interaction between people with very clearly defined relationships—it is all but impossible for Hawkes to stay as far away from the conventional novel as he would like.

Still, he does his best. He manages to set *The Blood Oranges* (1971) in some unnamed tropical demi-paradise that never does come into focus. The book is about two men who swap wives: Cyril, the "sexually liberated" narrator (whose puerile philosophical mots —e.g., "the only enemy of mature marriage is monogamy"—Hawkes seems to take completely seriously), initiates the swap; the other man, Hugh, a pornographic photographer, eventually comes down with terminal guilt pangs and commits suicide, after which his wife Catherine is institutionalized and Cyril's wife Fiona leaves, taking with her Hugh's three children. *Death, Sleep and the Traveler* (1974) is about one Allert, a collector of pornographic albums who has been sharing his wife Ursula with his friend Peter, a psychiatrist; Allert takes a cruise, on which he has an affair with one Ariane. She

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disappears at sea; Allert is accused of murder; Ursula testifies in his behalf, then clears out. *Travesty* (1976) is a *récit*; the unnamed narrator is driving a car across France; in the backseat are his daughter Chantal and Henri, a poet who has been sleeping with both her and the narrator's wife Honorine. At the beginning of the book the narrator tells his passengers that he's going to smash the car into a wall a few miles up the road and kill them all; the remainder of the book consists of his recital, along the way, of anecdotes about sex with his mistress and his delight in pornography. *The Passion Artist* is about a man named Konrad Vost whose surrealistic sexual adventures involve his daughter, a prostitute, and his mother, a prison inmate. *Virginie: Her Two Lives* is about an eleven-year-old French girl who lives in two centuries. In 1945 she lives in a "Sex Arcade" with her brother, a raunchy cab driver named Bocage; in 1740, she lives with a "sensualist" named Seigneur, whose kept women burn him to death at the end of the book.

The attitude toward sex in these novels is sub-adolescent, and the eagerness (and utter inability) of the author to appear hip is pathetic. Hawkes wants desperately to come across as a roué, but he only succeeds in sounding like a middle-aged English professor who wants desperately to come across as a roué. Even a giggly twelve-year-old would soon tire of Hawkes's unrelieved preoccupation with clothing, underwear, and naked bodies—a fetishistic obsession which causes some sections of *Death, Sleep and the Traveler,* for example, to sound like fragments from letters to *Penthouse*:

> Ursula made no attempt to defend herself against the handfuls of heavy lotion which Peter, as I could now clearly see, was smearing across the tight rounded surfaces of Ursula's translucent underpants.
>
> I was sexually aroused in the depths of my damp swimming trunks as I had not been since long before the disappearance of the ship's home port . . . .
>
> "Let me hear what you can do with your flute."
>
> "Very well," she answered then. "But it may not be as easy as you think. You see, I play in the nude."

Parts of *Virginie,* meantime, read like excerpts from a poor translation of an X-rated French movie:

> "Do you think I could ever wear such foolishness? Sylvie," she cried, "Sylvie does not wear the frilly underpants!"
>
> "Look there," whispered Sylvie. "See how gently Monsieur Pidou uses the soap!"
>
> "And little Déodat," whispered Yvonne, "how buttery he is, and how red!"
>
> "Oh, the endless buttons of sailor pants!"

This sort of nonsense, however, is innocuous compared with the sadomasochism that pervades the later novels. In *Travesty,* for instance, the narrator boasts about spanking his mistress Monique, and of her coming after him immediately thereafter with a whip: "I thought she meant only to whip me lightly to ejaculation, a process, which, at that moment, I imagined as a fulsome and brilliant novelty." But she flays him bloody, and does so "with joy" and "with superb contempt." And as a result: "In my defeat and discomfort I too felt a certain relief, a certain happines for Monique . . . ." Cyril, the philosopher of *The Blood Oranges,* asserts that "most of us enjoy the occasional sound of pain, though it approaches agony." And the grubby gamboling of *Virginie* inspires such lines of dialogue as the following:

> "Virginie!" she called in a breath of pure amusement, "fetch the kettle. We are going to introduce Lulu to the raptures of steam!"
>
> "Mesdames!" Seigneur cried happily, and to me surprisingly, as he came at last among us and took his place at my table. "Mesdames, she who loves well punishes well!"

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I will not dwell on Hawkes's obsession with little girls, or with bestiality; but reference must be made to the scene in *Virginie* that begins with Seigneur delivering the following speech to one of his kept women, Colère:

> "No creature is too deformed to love," he said. "No act is too unfamiliar, too indelicate to perform. Repugnance has no place in the heart of a woman such as you. By embracing an animal, or several animals, you do no more than embrace the very man, those very men, for whom you are now preparing yourself in the art of love. Adoration cannot live without debasement, which is its twin. I must ask you to disrobe."

Whereupon Colère proceeds to have a sexual encounter with two dogs and a pig—mainly with the pig, a scene to which Hawkes devotes four pages. Apparently this is what Frederick Karl refers to when he describes Hawkes's later novels as creating a "vision . . . of breaking out, of movements beyond matrimonial convention, of developments in individual sensibility," and what William Gass means when he speaks of the "glorious sensuality" of these books. There's certainly nothing glorious going on here between people: men and women are forever abusing, abandoning, and betraying one another, the point apparently being that this is what intimate relationships are all about. They are founded not on love (there's very little of *that* in these books) but on passion, which in Hawkes's novels comes off as a form of totalitarianism.

Though Hawkes's career breaks up neatly into two periods, certain qualities run through all the novels. There's that prolix, pretentious style; that endless, amateurish pounding away at words like *agony* and *desolation*; that penchant for metaphors that sometimes don't make much sense but must sound powerful to his ear (in *The Blood Oranges,* for example, the "distant fortress . . . cupped in the shriveled palm of desolation"); those endless series of rhetorical questions:

> Why then this decided sensation of erotic power? Why the implication of some secret design? What brilliant and, so to speak, ravaging guile could possibly be concealed inside that slender and merely partial form? Why did I smile immediately and Fiona cry out in happy recognition at the black hole driven so unaccountably into that small portion of the stone which, realistically, should have revealed no more than sexual silence?

Most of the novels contain violence—murder, suicide. Hawkes remains clinically detached from his creations, but the obsessive cataloguing of chaos in the early books, and the exhaustive examination of sexual degradation in the later ones, makes it hard to overlook the possibility that this whole oeuvre is the product of a psyche desperate to dissipate its despair about mortality, entropy, and sin. This possibility, however, neither makes the early novels less tedious nor the later ones less offensive. The fan club seems to sense this, and has worked out explanations for all the gloom and grubbiness. Some suggest that Hawkes's books are profound commentaries upon the near-psychotic extremities of human despair (in the early novels) and passion (in the later novels). Others insist that his works are not meant to be taken seriously; they're supposed to be humorous, and if you don't see that, you're just obtuse. Hawkes seems to believe this himself. Witness the title of his new collection, *Humors of Blood and Skin,* and a few of his introductory remarks therein: "In *The Cannibal* I discovered an impulse toward comedy"; "*The Beetle Leg* is a mock . . . 'Western'"; *Travesty* is "a comic novel." Hawkesian humor is the subject of Greiner's book, *Comic Terror,* in which he singles out for comment the scene in *The Beetle Leg* where Mulge's mother Hattie dies and is buried above him in the dam: "Face down, eyes in dirt, she peered through the sandy side toward her son below, where he too lay, more awkward than she, feet up and head in the center of the earth." Greiner's gloss on this passage: "This kind of humor is not for everyone." *Humor*? Hawkes's

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comedy, you see, is "irreverent comedy at its best, designed not to amuse nor to provide a moment of quiet pleasure but to outrage," to "counter . . . complacency."

Countering complacency: that's what it comes down to. The club's favorite explanation for the gloom and grubbiness in Hawkes is, straightforwardly enough, that gloom and grubbiness are good for us. "One must confront the conceptual ugliness of human depravity," says Kuehl, and no writer helps one to do so better than Hawkes, whose visionary fiction "communicates objectively and uncompromisingly the nightmarish aspects of irrational twentieth-century existence." This notion of literature-as-emetic is common in academia, where the more nightmarish picture a novel paints of the contemporary world the more seriously it is likely to be taken; but the Hawkesians have carried the claims for the value of negativism to unprecedented lengths. Guerard, in his introduction to *The Cannibal,* set the fan club's tone for all time when he wrote that "John Hawkes clearly belongs, perhaps this is to his credit, with the cold immoralists and pure creators who enter sympathetically into their characters, the saved and damned alike. Even the saved are absurd, when regarded with a sympathy so demonic: to understand everything is to ridicule everything." What Guerard is doing here is singing the praises of a sensibility that sees very little distinction between virtue and evil, except perhaps for a tendency to be bored by the former and charmed by the latter. Does Guerard really consider immorality creditable and virtue absurd? Does Hawkes? Of course not—not in real life, anyway. But for the "demonic" Hawkes, and for the club members who have echoed Guerard's praise through the years, moral values in life are one thing, those in literature another. It all just goes to show how little regard they have for a humanistic notion of the novel as a means of understanding life and how strongly they're chained to an academic notion of the novel as a playing field for professors. Although it is hardly intended as such, *Humors of Blood and Skin* is the perfect testament to Hawkes's lifelong indifference to the one conception, and his perpetual inability to break the ties that bind him to the other.

The prosaic modern age

Erich Heller In the Age of Prose: Literary and Philosophical Essays. Cambridge University Press, 268 pages, $39.50

reviewed by Roger Kimball

In his classic study of modern German thought, *The Disinherited Mind* (1952), Erich Heller described his "unifying theme" as "the consciousness of life's increasing depreciation" in the face of "the predominance of the prosaic," of "experience so prosaic that its mere contemplation paralyzes the poetic imagination." This concern with the effects of the prosaic on the life of the imagination also stands at the center of the present work.

Indeed, readers acquainted with Professor Heller's work will find themselves on familiar territory in this latest collection of essays. He displays his accustomed urbanity and fluent erudition throughout the text, illuminating both the individual authors and the larger issues he discusses. Many characters who were featured in his earlier volumes—Goethe, Nietzsche, Rilke, Kafka, Mann, and Karl Kraus, among others—return to prominent roles here, though three of the fourteen essays that compose the book are devoted to somewhat less eminent newcomers: the Norwegian novelist and 1920 Nobel laureate Knut Hamsun; Theodor Fontane, who is generally considered Germany's first modern realist novelist; and the immensely popular cartoonist and satiric versifier Wilhelm Busch (1832-1908), author of *Max und Moritz* and other classics of the genre.

Heller's reflections on the predominance of prose prominently include reflections on the fate of language and learning in the age of prose. Especially in "The Broken Tradi-

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tion," in "Literature and Political Responsibility: apropos the letters of Thomas Mann," and in his essay on Karl Kraus we find him speaking with the concerned voice of the humanist and pedagogue, lamenting the current dismal state of literary studies and lobbying for the preservation of traditional standards of language use and interpretation. For, to put it somewhat paradoxically, the triumph of prosaic reality shows itself nowhere more clearly than in the decay of prose. And disturbances in the life of language, Heller notes, reflect disturbances in the life of culture generally. Thus part of the battle against the predominance of prose is the stewardship of the language tradition bequeaths us. "[L]anguage," he writes, "preserves the tradition of all speech, poetry and thought. We have not acquired it as one acquires an article of daily use, but have inherited it with the inescapable commitment to hand it on to the next generations. Language is common property like the soil and the air; and how we treat it increases, reduces, or corrupts the inheritance."

But like *The Disinherited Mind* and *The Artist's Journey into the Interior* (1965), *In the Age of Prose* dwells on nineteenth- and twentieth-century German literature and philosophy primarily in order to plumb the uncertain and often anguished vocation of art and literature in the modern age. Of course this troubled vocation is legible not only in the German tradition. Wallace Stevens, for example, gave it eloquent expression in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction":

> From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
> That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
> And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

The imagination's response to the assaults of modernity—to the pervasive sense of meaninglessness and loss of place despite staggering material progress, to the splintering of inherited values and traditional habits of thought: such is Heller's real theme in this book. The organizing metaphor he chooses for these typically modern assaults is "prose." "I have called the volume 'In the Age of Prose,'" he writes in his preface, "because all its chapters are concerned, in one way or another, with the fate of art, literature and thought in an epoch that is dominated by prose." And as he observes in his title essay, "The Poet in the Age of Prose: Reflections on Hegel's *Aesthetics* and Rilke's *Duino Elegies,*" "prose" tokens "not merely a manner of writing, but a style of comprehension, . . . prose is our psychology, our economics, our sociology—all our efforts intelligently to grasp the nature of the world."

This expanded conception of prose and the prosaic has its origin in Hegel's distinction, put forth in the *Lectures on Aesthetics,* between the bygone "age of poetry" and the modern age, the age of prose, an age whose view of reality is essentially determined by reason. For Hegel, art in its highest sense is to be understood not as an elevated form of entertainment but as "the sensuous manifestation of truth." Yet art in this highest sense now lies behind us. The modern conception of reality, grounded firmly in scientific rationality, has rendered art's claim to truth otiose. Art's very sensuousness excludes it from truth in a world where truth is understood to be fundamentally beyond the reach of the senses. In Heller's words, the imagination, inextricably tied to the sensible, has been "devalued in the economy of man's faculties. Our sense of truth forbids us still to take seriously the imaginative play" of art.

Hence art in the age of prose is no longer able to answer man's deepest spiritual and intellectual needs. It becomes a kind of decoration or filigree, embroidering—or evading—a reality it can no longer reveal. "We are above the level at which works of art can be venerated as divine, and actually worshipped," Hegel writes, with some nostalgia;

> art no longer affords that satisfaction of spiritual wants which earlier epochs and peoples sought in them . . . . The beautiful days of Greek art and the golden time of the later

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> Middle Ages are gone by. The reflective culture of our life today makes [their passing] a necessity for us . . . . From the point of view of its highest destiny, art is and remains for us a thing of the past.

In Hegel's view this development is the necessary consequence of man's freedom and rational nature. It is man's spiritual coming of age that inaugurates the age of prose. The triumph of reason thus culminates in the death of art.

As in earlier works, Heller's meditations here take place in the space between the stringent diagnosis of Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* and the Dionysian speculations of Nietzsche, who championed art as an antidote to the tyranny of scientific rationality. ("Only as an aesthetic phenomenon," Nietzsche wrote in *The Birth of Tragedy,* "is life and the world eternally justified.") Like Heidegger in the epilogue to "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heller acknowledges the force of Hegel's argument but is reluctant to concede its inevitability. For if the modern conception of truth radically diminishes the competence of art, it also radically diminishes the stature of man. Perhaps it was his reflection on *this* diminishment that led Nietzsche, in *The Will to Power,* to declare that "We possess *art* lest we *perish from the truth.*"

In any case, this aspect of our rationalist legacy puts an enormous burden on any art that still aspires to be more than an elevated form of entertainment. Now, writes Heller, "the poet has to produce out of his own inner self, not only the poetry, but also, as it were, the climate, the temperature in which it can breathe." It is one of the main tasks of *In the Age of Prose* to explore modern art's more strenuous efforts to salvage some remnant of spiritual vitality in an age dominated by the prose of rationality. Heller thus gives detailed consideration to Rilke's poetry of withdrawal in the *Duino Elegies,* to Mann's reflections on art and the demonic in *Doctor Faustus,* and to Heidegger's efforts to retrieve the "essence of poetry" from the prosaic clutter of modern rationality.

It is one of Heller's greatest virtues as a critic that his sympathy for art's rebellion against the prosaic is tempered by his recognition of the dangers of that rebellion. Thus, despite his great admiration for Rilke's poetry, he criticizes the extreme, almost ascetic inwardness that Rilke's passion for spiritual purity engendered, a passion that bordered on world rejection. "Nowhere," we read in the seventh Duino Elegy, "will the world exist but within." Similarly, though deeply indebted to Nietzsche's later reflections on art, Heller refuses to acquiesce in what he considers Nietzsche's willful jettisoning of truth for the sake of art's beautiful illusions. Both writers claim that their meditations, however somber or—in the case of Rilke—otherworldly, result in a gesture of affirmation or praise. But, picking up a point he had made in *The Disinherited Mind,* Heller takes them both to task for promulgating a view of art as "intransitive" affirmation, a swooning "Yes!" that lacks any ground or definite object. "Rühmen, das ist's!"—"Praising, that's it!" Rilke exclaims in the *Sonnets to Orpheus.* But precisely *what* is being praised? And precisely what is Nietzsche affirming when he excitedly proposes art's "affirmative" character as a "countermovement" to nihilism? "[I]t is probably due to Nietzsche and Rilke," Heller writes in "Nietzsche's Last Words About Art and Truth,"

> that the language of poets has become accustomed to the—as it were—intransitive use of such verbs as "affirm" or "praise." This is more than a matter of grammar: grammar, as it often does, mirrors here the grammar of consciousness itself. It is impossible to make articulate sense, and not merely an ecstatic-intoxicated dithyramb, of the praiseworthiness of praise itself; or simply to affirm affirmation.

Students of Nietzsche may object that Heller underestimates Nietzsche's continuing *struggle* with the problem of truth and his growing insistence on the importance of honesty ("the youngest among the virtues,"

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as he put it in *Zarathustra*). The later Nietzsche, after all, sought to distance himself from the Wagnerian Romanticism of *The Birth of Tragedy* and extolled a more sober, classical view of art. But Heller's concern is well founded. The intransigence of prosaic reality often spawns an extravagant, escapist art. "Beheld with the eyes of art," Heller notes, "the world appears *sub specie necessitatis,*" under the aspect of necessity, and as such it promises respite from the contingency and meaninglessness that saturates everyday, prosaic life. But the price of that respite is high. For our world is not the pristine, necessary world of art, where everything is arranged according to the artist's vision, but a messy world of possibility and choice in which expectation is continually chagrined by novelty. In taking a step beyond the diminished reality of the age of prose, art threatens to step outside empirical reality *tout court.*

There are two main strategies that art can adopt in its campaign against the dominance of prose: it can attempt to *circumvent* reality, replacing it with aesthetic constructions; or it can turn inward, seeking a "deeper" reality through the cultivation of the spontaneous, the immediate, the irrational. The first signals the triumph of freedom in the willful aestheticizing of the world; the second signals the denial of freedom and self-consciousness in the service of irrational "life." Both evade the exigencies of empirical, prosaic reality.

Surely one of the most stunning evocations of the first option, the ambition to transform everyday life by aestheticizing it, occurs in Hermann Hesse's novel *The Glass Bead Game.* In his introduction to the book, Hesse provides an outline of the rudiments of the Game that might serve equally well to describe certain contemporary schools of art and criticism. "The Glass Bead Game," Hesse writes,

> is a mode of playing with the total contents and values of our culture; it plays with them as, say, in the great age of the arts a painter might have played with the colors on his

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> palette. All the insights, noble thoughts, and works of art that the human race has produced in its creative eras, all that subsequent periods of scholarly study have reduced to concepts and converted into intellectual property—on all this immense body of intellectual values the Glass Bead Game player plays like the organist on an organ . . . . A Game, for example, might start from a given astronomical configuration, or from the actual theme of a Bach fugue, or from a sentence out of Leibniz or the Upanishads, and from this theme, depending on the intentions and the talents of the player, it could either further explore and elaborate the initial motif or else enrich its expressiveness by allusions to kindred concepts.

Though Heller does not discuss *The Glass Bead Game,* he clearly recognizes the phenomenon that Hesse describes. Thus he deals at length with Adrian Leverkühn's reflection on art in *Doctor Faustus.* "Art would like to stop being pretense and play," Leverkühn tells his friend Serenus Zeitblom; "it would like to become knowledge." In the art Leverkühn envisions, Heller observes, "[t]echnique sets itself up as art's alpha and omega" with the "stealthy expectation that technical perfection may yield something like meaning, even if this meaning is not much more than the critique of art, the kind of critique that strains to become an art in its own right."

Heller's touches on the second option—the cult of spontaneity—in his essay "The Dismantling of a Marionette Theatre; or, Psychology and the Misinterpretation of Literature." This essay brings together the other side of art's challenge to the predominance of the prosaic with Heller's concern for the proper use of language and responsible interpretation. Heinrich von Kleist's "On the Marionette Theater" is a classic production of the German Romantic spirit, crystallizing in a few pages its obsession with the connection between self-consciousness, spontaneity, and artistic creativity.

The essay takes the form of a dialogue between a narrator and a dancer of the city's ballet. Having often observed the dancer at performances of the marionette theater, the narrator asks why a dancer, so skilled in the art of movement, should be drawn to watch the mechanical feats of a puppet. The dancer explains that he is fascinated by the peculiar grace and expressiveness that come from the puppet's utter lack of self-consciousness; for lacking self-consciousness, the movements of the puppet also lack affectation. Self-consciousness corrupts spontaneity, blocking the free expression of the spirit. Thus, though he is an excellent fencer, the dancer explains, he was unable to make a single hit against a pet bear he engaged at the house of a friend. The animal's intuitive perception, unclouded by self-consciousness, gave him a supreme advantage over all the dancer's acquired skill.

By way of biographical background, Heller notes that Kleist speaks of suffering from an "intimate" physical affliction. We do not know what the nature of the affliction was, according to Heller, but since it appears to have been alleviated by simple surgery, he conjectures that it was nothing more than phimosis and the surgery circumcision. In its meditation on the relation between spontaneity, the unconscious, and artistic creativity, Kleist's piece on the marionette theater stands as one of the charter documents of what Geoffrey Hartman has aptly termed the Romantic project of "anti-self-consciousness." Heller outlines the plot and significance of Kleist's essay, but does so mostly to set the stage for a contemporary interpretation of the piece that he wishes to share with us. In what might have been a beginner's étude for the Glass Bead Game, an author in a respected psychoanalytic journal opines that Kleist's intimate physical problem was

> probably the deepest source of his preoccupation with mind-body fragmentation, paralysis of function, and loss of grace and beauty. The portrait of a fencer suddenly incapable of "thrusting" is a thinly disguised fear of sexual impotence. Kleist's depiction of the puppet's legs as "nothing but pendula," his notion of a dancer who has his "soul" in his "elbow," and the portrait of an adolescent suddenly unable to move his leg into a desired position all express sym-

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bolically the situation of sexual impotence. (The image of a dancer with his soul in the "small of his back" in addition suggests a feminine sexual identification and anal penetration fantasies.) All suggest a sexualized hyper-awareness, a feeling of deadness in, and lack of control over, a body part which is not fully integrated with the self . . .

Charity requires that the author of this effusion remain anonymous. As Heller remarks, the piece is its own best self-parody. Yet it admirably captures the hermeneutical hubris that the corruption of language abets.

The thoughtful essays in this volume amply attest to the dominance of prose in all its manifestations. Such dominance is the ineluctable given, the *terminus a quo* of the modern spirit. But by witnessing that spirit's eloquent oppositions, Heller reminds us that victory over the prosaic sometimes consists simply in the tenacity, the passion, of continued struggle.

Finding a voice

Rosanna Warren Each Leaf Shines Separate. Norton, 96 pages, $14.95

reviewed by Robert Richman

Opening to the very first page of Rosanna Warren's first collection of poems, *Each Leaf Shines Separate,* we realize straightaway that we are in the presence of an important new talent.

Petals fell white and remorseless as
snow layering sleep on sleep as sky
hands unrolled one endless bolt of dimity,
  and down
all floated, veiling the garden where
the real gardenia once, from its cumbrous
  vase,
exploded in a sand-grit gust to shed
benediction on the sleeping cat:
made the old woman laugh as it unloosed
dangerous sweetness on the air.

This inaugural scene, rich with despair, written in an impulsive, almost ungainly, style, and of rather difficult access, captures our intellectual and emotional attention—and keeps it. For we feel in it an irresistible current of energy—nervous and unsteady, to be sure, but powerful all the same—impelling these lines forward. The tension between the air of desolation in these lines and their irresistible energy and power gives the poem ("Garden") a quality that we have seldom encountered in our recent poetry.

It is a quality that makes us immediately curious about the elements that have shaped it. What are we to make of this marriage of energy and despair that seems so central to Rosanna Warren's poetic voice? Perhaps we are offered a clue in the fourth and final section of the poem.

The plant from Seventh Avenue
sits on the Ninth Street sill.
Leaves, at the florist's shining green,
cringe like small hands.
Aging, the flowers turn
mild butter yellow. But new buds twist
as pale green torches in the fists
of many liberties.
Light drawls in from the window,
delivers the room.
I rise from my sheets,
shake off my petals, veils of sleep,
water the potted gardenia from a jar.
It's morning. I begin.

I begin my life.

In these lines we see that this desolate "garden" is a scene of birth—the birth of the writer's poetic consciousness. The conflict we are made to feel between the force of despair and the force of regeneration is really a struggle between the poet's sense of an oppressive, indifferent world and the brash, untested energies of her newly discovered poetic vocation. "Garden" is about an irresistible will to *create* in the face of great odds. What these odds are Rosanna Warren tells us by vividly contrasting contemporary vignettes of personal experience with histor-

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ical images of a particularly grim sort. The Mycenaean, Turkish, and German invasions are invoked to signify just how great the world's resistance is to this "birth": "Cannonballs . . . falling thick as centuries . . . stunned/the land." It is no wonder that this poet, unwillingly "dredged from sleep," moves at this point with an evident diffidence and uncertainty. In addition to being unsure of her powers, she is haunted by a fear of failure. She nonetheless "shake[s] off [her] petals, veils of sleep," to declare: "It's morning. I begin./I begin my life."

Each Leaf Shines Separate traces the struggle of a young poet to establish her voice. It is a struggle of discovery. She must contend not only with the immense difficulty of nurturing this voice and its newly discovered sensibility in an indifferent, cacophonous world but also with the effort to resist some of the more sinister ideas and perceptions which a devotion to the life of art may foster. What these ideas are we soon discover as we follow, in telescoped form, the course Rosanna Warren has travelled. It is a voyage that begins, as the poem "Garden" begins, with grave doubts about the use of poetry, and ends—as "Garden" ends—with the acceptance, by the poet, of the power and importance of her chosen art form, as well as a deeper understanding of its limits. The three stages of this voyage are reflected in the division of the book into three parts.

In the second poem, "World Trade Center," a tiny tugboat trailing a point of light through the night represents the immensity of the budding poet's chosen task.

> Below, in river blackness, a single tug-
> boat drags one point of light across the dark.
> It wants to punctuate
> the entire, shiftless story of the night.

But the world resists the poet's initial attempt to master it:

> We dance, we look, I can't
> read our own sentence,
> our candle guttered in its pool of wax.
> Outside the stars are wheeling. Bridges string
> sequins from nowhere to nowhere. Jeweled
> words
> lie tossed on the blackened scroll:
>
> tossed to the curled, soiled fringes of the
> world.

The unformed poet, unable to tame the "soiled fringes of the world," paints a picture of futility, one that appears to be even more hopeless than "Garden." The poet's presence—the element of "hope" in "Garden"—is represented in another way in "World Trade Center." It is to be found in the shift from some rather gaudy contemporary images ("we figure as . . . minute provisoes on the lease/the squinting lawyer can't make out") to more traditional and "poetic" ones ("We are so small beneath the stars . . ."). In these shifts we discover the first evidence of the poet's creative impulse. It is almost imperceptible, its very elusiveness serving to remind us the poet is in the earliest stages of growth.

Because the poet is far from mastering her task, she is wary about it. She often feels, at this juncture, that poetry is a vulgar violation of life and feeling. The epigraph to the third poem, "Funerary Portraits," reads: "In a world of stone, they grieve in stone." And Rosanna Warren's language again reflects her disillusion; the "mother" of the first of these portraits, sits

> dazed, with a small box on her lap
> containing those objects—comb,
> perfume vial, jade necklace—which she will
> take
> with her to a world where they can no longer
> be used
> and where beauty is not an issue.

A more highly developed poet might have improved upon "those objects," "can no longer be used," and "beauty is not an issue," and in fact there is much here to remind us of the poet's uneasiness about art. These ancient stones, survivors of famines, plagues, and wars, still challenge the nascent

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poet's belief in the utility of artistic creation. Yet these "dead" stones, like Timarista the elder, whose image is depicted on the third stone, "star[e]" to something beyond, "her free left arm/thrust out, away, hand open as though/to seize on a new life." A "new life" of creativity, to be exact, for a young artist living today. Thus these stones, like the ceaseless (and almost overwhelming) flow of history in "Garden," play a paradoxical role in inspiring the poet.

The rest of the poems in the first section of this absorbing book deal with further realizations and understandings necessary for the young poet. Among them, and crucial, is the understanding that nature is more important—and more inspiring—than the pictures and sculptures of ancient civilizations. And with this understanding nature comes alive in Rosanna Warren's language: "The night world leans," "Thistles point," etc. Another realization, however, is the potential intransigence of the poet's new subject as expressed in "Haoma."

> Listen, the wind, it rises again.
> Drugged with Asia, weighted with ocean passage,
> it roils through the town and it respects no house,
> no words, no window. Shutters crash. Red wind.

A corollary to this is the poet's new awareness that beauty, in both art and nature, is achieved only through labor, pain, and sacrifice. "We pay for beauty," she says in "History as Decoration." This feeling is at times so powerful that the poet finds herself dismissing, as in "A Cypress," those who believe that "the crystal of soul/survives" nature's death-dealing blows. Against it, says Warren, our lives are only "fables" we live "until we too/cease to obstruct the wind." As for the "brave gaudiness" of art? "It is a lie."

The poet breaks free of this cycle of cynicism and despair when she meets the painter Theora Hamblett. This incident is recounted in the long last poem of the first section. Hamblett's lonely dedication to her art provides the poet with the stimulus needed to overcome her despair. In this is yet another paradox—Rosanna Warren's poems are full of them. As good a subject as nature is, it cannot persuade the poet to dedicate her life to art. The inspiration for this must come from a living example, someone who has done it already. This transitional poem is called, appropriately, "Through the East Door." And in the third poem of the second section the poet declares: "I, too, have a voice."

Yet her education is not yet complete. "Interior at Petworth: From Turner" illustrates how risky the poet's work of revealing details about lives and feelings can be.

> A bloody haze arises, it could be
> my own eyes that fail.
> I hear nothing, but fear
> the upstairs rooms, cramped rooms
> I have not entered in ages, only remember
> the draughts, creakings, grime in closet corners,
> windows too tight to lean from, the smell
> of antique damp. And now, who knows
> what acts unroll
> on narrow beds, on floorboards warped askew?

Because the poet's understanding of poetry is increasing, she writes with greater confidence. The poems of this second section are more musical, expansive, and subdued—less tortured, at any rate, than the uneasy poems of the first section. But in Rosanna Warren's world of paradox and duality, there is never a statement without a qualification, or, in this case, progression without regression. No sooner do we see the poet's language flowing a bit easier than the world of nature is shown to resemble, as it does in "Music for Railroad, Telephone Wire, and Easter,"

> one continental cataract of trash
> through which weeds thrust, not green . . .

while over it the poet, now "in solitude, floats."

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Such "qualifications"—all of them analogues of the tension between creativity and despair in "Garden"—can at times appear to be in total opposition. In "Renoir" the poet admires the "ghostly vermilion" of a painting as it recedes into memory, "when these chroma/and characters have faded/into the single, sensual blur of an afternoon/lost." She claims this is the "truest pattern, radiance revealed," but in the very next poem her admiration shifts to a world of sharper, more particular detail.

Abrupt shifts of this kind are even found within poems. Rosanna Warren's language, in its supple attunement to the paradoxicality and duality of the world she is discovering, often moves from the particular to the general, or—and this is what is truly remarkable—from a classical, stoical remove to a disarming, emotionally raw intimacy, all with the ease of a master. Just as extraordinary in its mastery is her ability (first seen in "Garden") to move from the historical to the personal. Such transitions, which constitute one of the poet's most difficult tasks, are of primary importance to Rosanna Warren. They are always an enactment of the struggle between the individual ego-voice of the slowly maturing poet and the resistant world in which she wishes to find a place. Not surprisingly, these shifts become smoother and more seamless as the book—and the poet's consciousness—develops. In the final stages of the poet's growth she does not in the least relinquish her "intimate" voice: on the contrary, she enlarges its range. What this signifies is the triumph, however provisional, of the living voice over the dead past. But the past is not to be understood as the enemy here. Without having seriously engaged it and struggled with it, as Rosanna Warren has, these final "intimate" poems would not have this quality or resonance.

The third and final section of *Each Leaf Shines Separate* begins with "Jigsaw Puzzle in the Suburbs," a poem in which the poet's mature, "intimate" voice is shown in full power. It is here quoted in full.

While you assemble Monte Carlo
piece by blue-gray piece, encouraging
the small, stump-limbed
fragments to snuggle

logically, the teen-aged
girls upstairs
bawl, shredding
their voices at each other

and the toddler next door
meanders unsteadily across our plot
of basil and young tomatoes.
I share the room

as you pore
over the linkage of smoke-green hills, stacked
terraces, ashen
foreign streets; I try

to conjugate
from memory the Greek verb
"to learn," and the child
in my womb gently nudges me on.

Our other neighbor, Lou,
paces his porch, growling
at Jews, his banged-up Buick, and maple
  boughs
that snatch at his hat:

I'm learning
that Lou is real; in fact,
smiling his bristly
smile, gave us the puzzle. In Monte

Carlo, a gem-blue rectangle
starts to emerge: public pool.
These cobwebs
must be rigging

of yachts, I say. We fought
last night, not knowing
why, but lying awake
hours, apart,

then sleeping stiffly, to wake up
ignorant
in each other's arms.
In the puzzle, two more

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blues lock. It is all
starting to fit: this picture
we piece together
while our child

grows toward us, quivering
in darkness with wide open eyes. More
shrieks from upstairs, already
heard in the womb.

The child can't see, but will learn,
how you've found
a conjugation of shadows for the heart
of the harbor;

and how, for a moment, we rest there
while
this day, like the young
basil, rises into late afternoon
in spite of us all.

The poet's education is nearing completion. Timarista and Krito, the mother and daughter immortalized in the "historical" funerary portrait in stone of part one, are replaced in this more "personal" setting by the poet herself and her child. The poet cannot remember how to conjugate, "to learn" in Greek, but it is clear that any "education"—even the long, difficult apprenticeship of a poet—cannot aid in alphabetizing her feelings, any more than the stone (or the paintings she discusses in so many of her earlier poems) did. For Rosanna Warren, feelings at this stage in her growth are well beyond rationality, even beyond art and memory. Rosanna Warren's language is never more limpid than when she is addressing this conundrum.

The book doesn't end here, however. Rosanna Warren remains a poet despite her newly acquired view of art. The antagonisms that separate life from art, history from the individual, that intervene between the efficacy of facing the world with stoicism or with intimacy, do not disappear. But in the final few, exquisite poems in this book, these oppositions converse with a fluency that is especially compelling right now.

It is compelling right now because the bittersweet note on which the book closes is something we really haven't seen for a while. Bound up so intimately in the poet's travails, yet in reality so removed from her—isn't this the paradox at the core of the best poetry?—we feel, at the end of *Each Leaf Shines Separate,* pulled gently in opposite directions.

Give me your hand.
We have come this far
together, apart.

("Rocamadour")

This is an extension, a refinement, of the tension we felt in the book's first poem. Rosanna Warren hasn't solved the problems laid out in the book's first poems, but she has certainly learned how, as a poet, to make them a fruitful part of her life.

Attempting to transcribe the stages of poetic maturation—the wish to record "each separate shining leaf"—requires a great deal of skill, talent, and devotion toward one's craft. It also requires on the part of the poet an unalloyed trust in the reader. I suspect it is this element of trust that helps make Rosanna Warren's book the unusual achievement it is.

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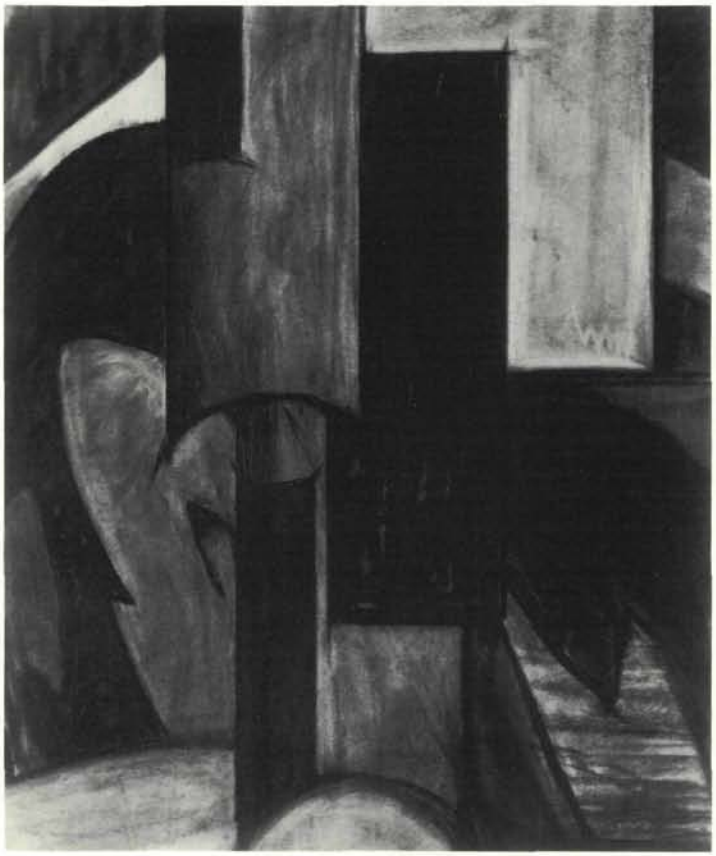

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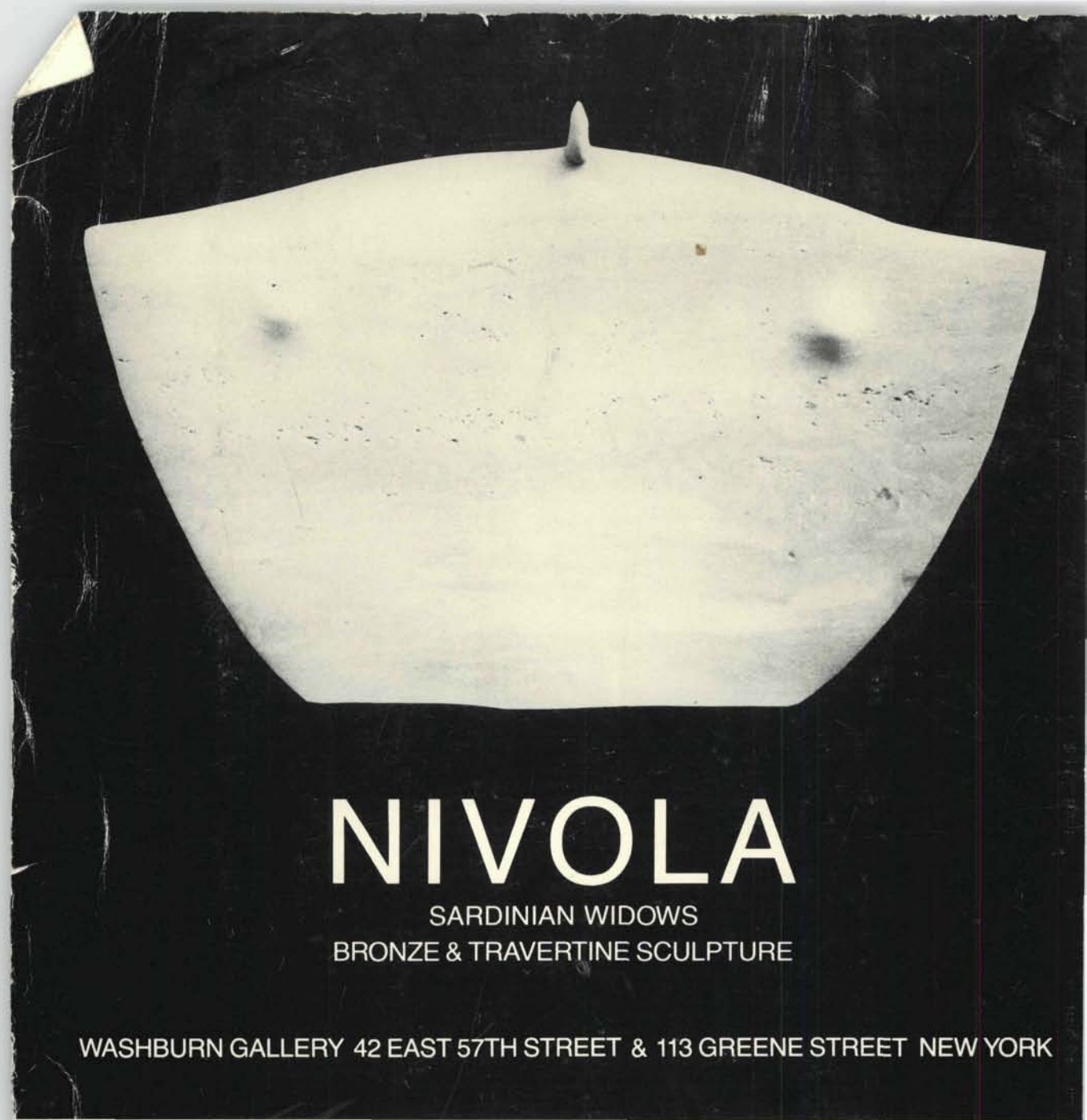

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